THE SEASON FOR MURDER

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THE SLEEP IS DEEP

THE SEASON FOR MURDER

By

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CHAPTER ONE

THE pilot shouted, headed the light plane into the wind-torn hole in the boiling January snow clouds. For a moment, sunlight showed snow devils whirling across the peaks of the continental divide.

The clouds closed in quickly, blindingly.

The plane's passenger watched the pilot fight the controls, nursed his own nausea brought on by the fierce up and down draughts coming from the gorges and canyons below. His safety belt bit at him as the plane appeared to drop away from beneath him.

The pilot turned, shouted something.

The passenger could only guess the words, but he felt they were in the nature of an 'I told you so.' He repeated the words he had used to stifle the pilot's unwillingness to attempt this crossing of the continental divide in Colorado midwinter. 'The trip was important!' He smiled grimly as he noticed his use of the past tense.

The wind tossed and pushed the light plane, toyed with it for an endless time, which in other circumstances would have been measured in minutes.

Completely blinded, they never saw the jagged rocks of the mighty barrier they struck.

CHAPTER TWO

ZEBULION BUCK drove his green Cadillac out through the rock arch entrance of Alpine Lodge, turned on to the smooth main highway which led into the only street of the Colorado mountain town of Geneva.

Jim Dunn, his partner in the Pine Detective Agency of Denver, stretched his length comfortably. 'This is better than the agency jeep. Glad to have you back from Washington. Or did I say that?'

Buck smiled. He was a small man, clean shaven, with a short, almost pug nose and a full red-lipped mouth. The olive skin of his forehead had no lighter line at the edge of his closely cropped black hair. His dark eyes, which could be so opaque and blank, were touched now with the warmth of his friendship for his gangling ex-Texan partner, Jim Dunn. Buck wore no hat, but otherwise he was still dressed in the formal Washington attire, complete with brief-case, just as he had stepped off the plane in Denver a few hours before. In World War Two, Zebulion had risen by leaps and bounds to Pfc for one day, before a difference of opinion with his superiors on the conduct of the war had demoted him. His establishment of the Pine Detective Agency, his wealth, and his wide circle of highly placed friends, had brought a call from Washington for a job which was so hush-hush that Buck himself often did not know details. 'You did say it before,' Zebulion said, 'but I don't mind hearing it again.'

Jim decided Washington had not changed his partner much. True, Buck showed signs of wincing when certain too-used and abused words and phrases were spoken in his hearing. And Zebulion, who could never have been accused of being a blabber-mouth before, was so tight-lipped now Jim was still in the dark about many details of the job they were on.

'You bring your throwing knives with you?' Jim asked.

Buck frowned. 'No. I didn't. This isn't that sort of a job. I won't need them.'

Dunn moved his six foot three inch body into a more comfortable position. The pearl handled .45 in his shoulder holster nestled reassuringly against his lean body. 'Glad to hear it. Even if I don't like what I know about our little chore. Come the month of May in the mountains, I think of spring. I think of birds, and bees and wild flowers. So what do we do? We hunt bodies.'

Buck drove the quarter mile which was broken up by the seven establishments of Geneva, turned around at the school house at the far edge of town, and came to a stop. 'Peaceful little place,' he commented. 'Some setting for a town. Look at those peaks, Jim. People are lucky to live here.'

Dunn's grey eyes twinkled. 'You've been east too long. You ought to know people who live in the mountains the year round, never see them – unless they get stuck on a grade. Most of them have a living to make, usually during the three summer months. The rest of the year they can spend developing feuds and petty squabbles, and wishing they'd moved to the city.'

Zebulion Buck said mildly, 'What's the matter with you? You used to be able —'

'To take the bitter with the sweet,' Jim said. 'And you know what ails me. Avalanches!'

Zebulion decided he could prod his partner a bit. 'You disapprove of avalanches on general principles or because they don't have them in Texas?'

'Avalanches!' Jim muttered. 'Avalanche control experts! We'll be laughed out of town. What do you know about avalanches?'

'Well,' Buck said, 'I've heard they usually travel down hill.'

'That's dandy. I suppose I'll find out what this is all about in due time. There's the local ranger station over there. Let's go impress the forest ranger with our brilliance.'

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Fred Roane, U.S. Forest Ranger, greeted them from behind his glass-topped desk, waved a hand towards two chairs, said, 'Be with you in a minute,' and went on typing out a report with five carbons.

The room was neat, spotlessly clean, and the framed samples of local grasses served for pictures. One wall was a glassed-in bookcase, crammed with countless paper-backed volumes of government reports on everything from the love life of wood-ticks, to the use of bloodhounds in the tracking down of arsonists who specialised in starting forest fires.

A section of bark dangled from a string, and the wood showed an intricate pattern of insect burrowing.

'Beetles,' Roane said. 'Those are pine beetles, but I have a sample of spruce beetle work here somewhere.'

Buck said importantly, 'You have been notified of our pending arrival.' He took out his wallet, extracted a card and let it rest a few seconds on the desk in front of the ranger before whisking it out of sight.

Jim was impressed by Buck's act. 'The Washington manner,' he told himself silently.

Roane might have been impressed, but he did not look very happy. His lips formed silent words Jim thought to be, 'My God! Another one!' before he said aloud, and stiffly, 'I have been notified to co-operate with you in every possible way. Naturally I knew you had arrived. You are staying at Alpine Lodge, paying twenty-five dollars a day rent, and you drive a 1952 Cadillac. What do you want of me?'

'We will want to see all the avalanches and slides in your district.'

Roane rubbed his cheek. 'Quite a chore. Quite a bit of rough country to cover.'

Buck took some papers from his brief-case, and Jim suppressed a grin. Zebulion had not been in Washington long enough to handle a brief-case with aplomb. The zipper stuck, and the whole contents came within an inch of spilling out.

'These,' Buck said, 'are recent aerial photographs of this area. It is my understanding the dark areas on the steep slopes mark the path of slides.'

Roane studied the pictures, and his whole attitude underwent a change. He arranged them in sequence, said, 'Good pictures.'

Buck barely stopped himself from saying they should be, as the ranger went to a filing cabinet, took out the aerial photographs of his district made by the government.

Side by side, the two sets were too similar in clarity and technique for coincidence to play any part. Roane's set, however, had cryptic notes written on the margins.

Fred Roane said slowly, 'I'm going into this blind, as you probably know. Obviously this is a matter of great importance or you wouldn't have those pictures.'

'Avalanche control is of the utmost importance,' Buck said.

Roane shrugged. 'Have it your way.' He started checking. 'This is a slide all right. That's a sheer cliff where snow never sticks. Here's another slide, and another. And another cliff. Now here's one of the worst slide areas in my district. Around Red Cone. One whole side of that mountain dropped away in some prehistoric earthquake. Or so I'm told. You can find slide evidence almost any time of year, and hunters have been killed there early in the autumn. Come spring, and the thaws, and there may be a dozen fresh slides overnight.'

Dunn decided he might as well get into the conversation before he forgot how to talk. 'I gather almost anything can start an avalanche? A gunshot even. I've heard of one instance where a plane crash started one.'

Zebulion scowled at his partner.

Fred Roane was a fairly short man, with a faintly pink skin which would never weather. His blue eyes were sharp, and they now took on an added intelligence. 'There are still three planes missing from last winter, planes which might possibly have come down in this area. They'll be found some time. It's strange, but though it's easy to lose things in the mountains, you can't count on hiding anything.' He waited a moment, looked expectantly from Buck to Dunn. When neither of them spoke he went on with an answer to Jim's question. 'Certainly a plane crash could start a slide or avalanche. And the wreckage might be buried under tons of ice, snow, and boulders so it would be impossible to spot it from the air.' He pulled out a board with a map scotch-taped to its surface. 'This is my district. Do you have a choice as to which part you want to start in your investigation of – slides?'

'The southern part first,' Buck said.

Roane used his finger-nail to trace a direct line south-west from Denver to the border of New Mexico. It crossed a part of his territory. He looked up at Buck expectantly, but Zebulion's face was blank, with a complete lack of expression which Jim thought showed more than anything else his partner's Indian blood. 'All right,' Roane said. 'Probably a good place to start. And it'll be more open now. Tell you what. I'm due to make my spring tour any time now. You can come along with me, or — ' he took out a large scale forestry map, circled the location of slides in the whole area and indicated possible trails to each of them. 'Some of these are going to be tough to reach. I don't know whether it matters to you, but people around here are going to be inquisitive. They're going to think it's pretty strange to take the trouble to get to these slides. Unless, of course, they know you're working for – ah – Avalanche Control, wasn't it?'

'You can tell everyone. Make them understand.'

The ranger thought it over. 'Maybe I can do better than that for you. If it's worth the trouble. There's going to be a civic meeting at the school house tonight. Sort of a Chamber of Commerce affair.. You could talk to everyone, satisfy their curiosity so you won't be bothered later.'

'A civic association here?' Buck asked.

Roane said without inflection, 'Some of us are quite progressive. Some of us realise the benefits of co-operation. News travels fast in a small town, but if you want to expedite matters?' He left the question dangling.

Zebulion winced. 'Expedite' was one of the words which had become a pet abomination. He saw the expression on Dunn's face and braced himself for others.

'Sounds like a good deal,' Jim said. 'You have the know-how in this matter.'

'To hell with you,' Zebulion snapped. He saw the

expression on the ranger's face and forced a smile. 'All right, we'll do it. What time?'

'Be there at eight,' Roane said.

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Once again the green Cadillac moved silently down the highway towards Alpine Lodge where Sarah, Buck's wife, waited for them in a Colorado version of a Swiss chalet.

'Simmer down,' Jim said. 'I thought you might be home-sick for Washington. Too bad I couldn't figure out a way to get in "across-the-board" too.'

'That's not what's bothering me,' Buck said.

'Good. Then what is?'

'You know our orders,' Buck said.

Dunn shook his head. 'No, I don't. All you told me is we're supposed to find a plane that crashed last January. Somewhere. Maybe. Don't forget you just bounced into Denver, stayed one minute in the office – to give Miss Wister a treat, I suppose – and then loaded Sarah and me into the car. You didn't talk about our job on the way up.'

'We had definite orders not to mention we were looking for this plane.'

'Maybe you did,' Jim answered. 'But when you come right down to it, I didn't say we were looking for a plane. Can I help it if Roane makes guesses? And when you said the southern part of the territory, he caught on pretty quick the missing plane might have been coming from New Mexico. And just to clear up one little thing, why do we want to find the plane and the possible bodies? Papers? Secret stuff?'

'No. No papers,' Zebulon said. 'The passenger in

that plane was allowed to carry nothing of that sort – except in his head. He carried a lot there. If he was killed, that's one thing. Bad enough, but not as bad as if he had just disappeared.'

'With his head intact?'

'Exactly.'

'But why all this avalanche control business? Why not just say we're hunting a lost plane. What's more reasonable than a couple of private detectives trying to pick up a few dollars reward money?'

Buck said stiffly. 'I have my orders.'

'All right. I guess that's reason enough. And before I forget it, I liked your Washington blow-hard act. Roane was all set to treat us like another government nuisance until he saw your photographs. Now, let's see if I have this straight. Our job is to find the missing plane, make sure the occupants are dead?'

'That's right.'

'This is the middle of May,' Jim said. 'If they crashed in January, they ought to be dead enough.'

'Yes. If they crashed. The man was carrying a large amount of money. Savings from three years of work. He hadn't spent anything during that time, because he couldn't where he was. He had enough to – but there's no use speculating. If we find the plane and bodies, we identify them, and we're finished. We're hunting through all the slides and avalanches, because this whole district was covered by search planes a few hours after the plane was due in Denver. And I mean thoroughly covered. The aerial photographs were taken then, and the slides we are going to visit were brand new. You see now?'

Jim Dunn said, 'The search planes found no trace of wreckage, so the photographs were taken to cover the eventuality of future search from the ground?'

'Right. And that's us, in this district. We finish up as soon as we can – unless we hear the plane has been found somewhere else. Then we go back to Denver for a celebration before I have to go east again.'

'I like part of it now,' Jim said. 'And the whole thing sounds simple enough – when you say it real fast!'

CHAPTER THREE

'THE meeting of the Geneva Civic Association will please come to order!'

The Chairman, Tom Cook, proprietor of Alpine Lodge, rapped firmly on the round golden oak table with a pencil. Colorado Springs had its Broadmoor, Central City its Teller House, Glenwood Springs its Colorado, but in the Silver Canyon district around Geneva, Alpine Lodge was *the* place. The grounds covered a hundred and sixty acres, and besides the main lodge which was a copy of a big Swiss hotel, there were eighteen chalets built on high timbers with rustic balconies and steep peaked roofs. The lodge and the heated swimming pool did not open until May 25th, the start of the fishing season, but at any time of year the man who ran Alpine Lodge had a position of importance in local affairs.

The Secretary, Roger Estes, opened a leather notebook and poised a fancy ball-point pen.

Jim Dunn and Zebulion Buck perched uncomfortably on metal folding chairs, a little apart from the 'natives,' and Jim at least sighed with relief when attention was diverted from them.

'Bugs on a pin,' Dunn muttered to himself. He tried to shift his length to a more comfortable position, succeeded only in making a clatter which brought all eyes towards him again. He subsided. His holstered gun dug into his ribs. He wished someone would open a window. The small room, with its dozen or so chairs, was filled with

the thawing winter smell of old over-shoes, wet coats, long since eaten lunches, and the general after-aroma of the eighteen pupils of all ages who came to the school – weather permitting – from surrounding ranches.

Zebulion Buck, with his uncanny ability to appear comfortable anywhere, had not moved a muscle, other than those which controlled his eyes. And he had had only short shifts of being stared at directly. Once the starer met his glance he or she found something of great interest in the opposite, or any other, side of the room.

Tom Cook – Alpine Lodge, Swiss Chalets, Heated Swimming Pool, Dining-Room, Cocktail Lounge, Maid Service, Horses for Hire – cleared his throat. He was a long-chested man in his early thirties. Seated, he made a commanding appearance with his deepset black eyes, bushy black hair and broad shoulders swelling out his tailored coat. Standing, he was apt to bring an unpremeditated smile from people meeting him for the first time. The shortness of his legs brought unbalance and his lack of over-all stature betrayed him at times into a self-pushing attempt at domination. His detractors said he would have been happier if he had had his way, and the flossy Alpine Lodge had been simply Cook's Court, Overnight Accommodations.

'Mr. Secretary, will you call the roll?'

Roger Estes moved his pen.

'Andy, "Red," Andrus?' He knew his partner was absent so he answered himself to that effect.

'Celeste Cook?'

'Present.'

'Tom Cook?'

'Present.'

'Roger Estes?' He mumbled the usual joke. 'I guess I'm here.'

'Bob Mintern?'

'Absent,' Mintern's wife Lucy answered. A moment later she said, 'Here!' when her own name was called.

'Harlan Purdy?'

'Right here.'

'Dan Walters?'

Estes marked Dan absent.

'George Walters?'

'Here,' Dan's father said.

Roger Estes made a calculation. 'Three absentees,' he reported. He turned a page, was ready to begin taking minutes.

Tom Cook asked, 'Is there a motion regarding the absentees?' He caught his wife's eye.

Celeste Cook was so constructed as to bring that gleam to any man's eye. Above middle height, she appeared even taller in the hand-made cowboy boots, with the three-gallon hat perched precariously on her naturally blonde hair. Her fringed suede jacket was pulled wide open to disclose the black satin shirt, with judiciously placed white buttons which gave a needless call of attention to her prominent breasts. Yet anyone considering her just another dumb blonde would have been sadly mistaken. To her went the credit for the conversion of a rundown auto court, with top season prices of five dollars a night, into a small, and smart Swiss Village with rooms in the lodge starting at fifteen dollars, and the chalets at twenty-five. And she made it pay. The elaborate Tyrolean cocktail lounge, the dining-room which could seat a hundred, the maid and tray service to the outlying chalets – everything paid its own way.

She winked long lashes over one violet eye. 'Mr. Chairman, I move the absentees be fined the customary dollar.'

'Second,' Harlan Purdy said.

The motion passed with no outward sign of opposition. Tom Cook waited until Estes had that bit of business recorded, then said, 'Before we go into the business of this evening, I would like to introduce our visitors. They are with us tonight to get information on avalanches, to further their work on avalanche control. And I might add we are glad to have them, and Mr. Buck's charming wife, as guests at Alpine Lodge. Mr. Buck, and Mr. Dunn.'

Someone snorted.

Jim and Buck stood up. They bowed. Jim Dunn sat down again and somehow managed to step on his hat which was on the floor beside his chair. Everyone watched with silent interest as he punched it back into shape.

Zebulon kept his feet, even smiled. 'At this early stage of our investigation,' he said loudly, then lowered his voice to fit more closely the size of the room, 'we are mainly seeking information. It would be a great help to us in our work, if any of you who know the location of slides or avalanches would report their whereabouts.'

Harlan Purdy – Purdy's Parlour, Sandwiches, Ice Cream, Home Cooking, No Liquor, Clean Reasonable Cabins – was a lean weathered widower in his late fifties. When he spoke, or became excited, his prominent Adam's apple raced up and down his leathery neck like a maroon golf ball, or a small red elevator delivering words to his large, tight-lipped mouth. His bushy yellow and white eyebrows were continually falling down over his faded eyes, and he brushed them up in an habitual hand sweep which continued on across the polished pinkness of his completely bald head.

'Avalanches!' Mr. Purdy snapped. 'We get a couple of little slides and we get experts bothering us all the rest of the winter.'

'Your little slides blocked the highway in three places,' Buck said. 'You were cut off for a full week.'

Jim Dunn relaxed. He should have known Buck would not let himself get into such a position without being prepared.

'Dynamiting and raising hell generally,' Purdy went on firmly. 'And all they did was give us bad publicity. Ruined our winter ski business. Not that it's much good anyway. But all those swarms of experts ought to have piled up any information they need.'

Zebulion went on smoothly. 'We're not concerned at the moment with those slides which blocked the highway. Those are receiving attention from proper quarters. We want to go farther up in the mountains, make a study of avalanches at their sources, chart their paths and record potential destruction. I can assure you there will be no adverse publicity. Later, I will ask each of you to locate on our maps, any high mountain slides you may know about.'

'Can't see any harm in that,' Purdy said. 'What you going to do when you find them?'

'It is a well-known fact that avalanches can be diverted quite often. A V-shaped wall of rock ten or fifteen feet high and twenty feet thick can divert the mass of snow and boulders towards areas where there will be no property loss.'

Harlan Purdy had a few last words on the subject. 'You're government men, all right. Couldn't be anything else, to come out here with such damfool ideas. Why don't you do something constructive like getting us back our slot machines? We only got three months up here to make a year's wages, and then they take away our slot machines. Why I tell you —'

Tom Cook rapped on the table and Purdy subsided in a bobbling mumble.

'We'll take no more of your time now,' Buck went on. 'Later, we will appreciate your co-operation.' He sat down. He and Jim were no longer of interest to those gathered. Their position was explained, and there were important things to be worked out and considered.

Cook took over. 'As you know, we're here to come to a final decision as to the date of our annual street dance. As well as to the location. Is there any discussion?'

George Walters – Walters' Service with a Smile, Complete Greasing, Towing, Wrecker Service, Welding and Tyres – spoke up quickly, 'You can use my station if you want. I have a good big cement driveway.' He was a ruddy man, nearing fifty, immaculately dressed in a conventional suit which made contrast to his work-scarred hands and broken, grease-filled nails.

'Why not have it right in front of our grocery?' Mrs. Mintern wanted to know. 'Then it'll be right in the middle of town.'

That brought up the question of the highway patrol, and the filling station was eventually selected as the site, with Purdy abstaining from both discussion and the vote.

The group beamed at one another, revelling in their spirit of civic co-operation as June 15th was decided as the date. Decided unanimously.

Likewise there was no difficulty in the matter of selecting an orchestra. A more or less local outfit consisting of a piano, accordion and guitar had agreed to donate their services as evidence of civic pride, and on the promise they would be paid for any future dances.

'One other thing on the agenda,' Cook began.

The door crashed open, interrupting him and turning all heads around to the entrance.

The small man who clumped in wore oversize muddy boots, a greasy leather jacket, drooping fur-lined cap,

and neatly patched clean blue jeans. A beak of a nose jutted out almost to the bill of the cap, separated glowing eyes. The rest of his face was all long, unkempt, black beard.

'You all know me,' he boomed. 'I'm Kermit the Hermit, and I've come to this meeting on business!'

Purdy said, 'We know who you are. Save your act for the tourists. Ain't it early for you to be out?'

Kermit said, 'Maybe I will save my act. Maybe I won't do it at all this summer! Geneva has a mighty good thing in me! Not every little town this size has a real live Hermit as a tourist drawing card.'

Tom Cook was soothing. 'We all know you're an added attraction, Kermit. That's why we've all been willing to chip in and give you a monthly retainer.'

'But now, we have inflation,' Kermit said firmly.

Roger Estes laughed. Usually very quiet, not yet thirty but already slightly stooped, his rimless glasses gave him a studious appearance not generally associated with his profession of bartender and cook and part owner of the Corral Bar and Grill – Perfect Mixed Drinks, Steaks and Trout Dinners Our Specialty, Estes and Andrus Props. He looked around the room quickly, saw no one else was amused, and began writing busily.

'You have no reason to laugh,' Kermit said. 'You have nothing to worry about. Everyone knows you have outside money back of you! You have it soft.'

'We might change places for a while,' Estes suggested.

Kermit ignored that, went on, 'Well, I've spoken my piece. Now, how about it?'

'How much of a raise do you want?' Cook asked.

The Hermit's eyes narrowed. 'I'm earning ten dollars a month now. Year round. I think I ought to have fifteen at least.'

'Move we give him twelve fifty,' Purdy said.

'No! No!' Kermit screamed. His lips and tongue were very red, his teeth white against the blackness of his beard. 'Look at the inflation! Look at the prices!'

'Move we give him fifteen,' Mrs. Mintern said.

'Second,' Walters grunted.

The motion was passed.

Celeste Cook patted the empty chair beside her. 'Come on and sit down, Kermit. You've had your way, now.'

The Hermit edged away fearfully. 'You – you! You're just after my money!' He ran from the room, slammed the door behind him.

Tom Cook scowled while the others laughed. 'Any further business?'

Mrs. Mintern smiled. In her early twenties, she wore a plain whipcord suit dress, nylon stockings on her beautiful long legs, and sturdy but highly polished oxfords. Her smile lifted her face from all repose, gave it an impish expression. Her greenish eyes sparkled with interest, laughter or mischief. 'There is the matter of refreshments,' she reminded.

Harlan Purdy spoke up, 'Let them walk across the road to my place. It's right handy.'

'I make a motion,' Lucy Mintern said, 'that we extend a vote of thanks to Mr. Purdy for offering to serve free refreshments.'

'Free?' Purdy's Adam's apple bounced up and down so rapidly it almost broke free. 'Free? Who said anything about free?'

'Did I say something wrong?' Mrs. Mintern asked with mock regret. 'I just thought it was understood we would serve free refreshments. Ice-cream for instance.'

'Free ice-cream!' The horror of it all kept Purdy's voice to a husky whisper. 'Why pick on me? You know ice-

cream and soft drinks are the way I get my crowd. Why not serve free beer or whisky?'

'Too expensive,' Lucy Mintern said practically. 'With ice-cream and a small scoop, you can put on quite a splurge.'

Cook asked, 'Do you put that in the form of a motion?'

She made it, while Purdy sputtered. There was no second. The solid front of the Geneva Civic Association had been dented.

'All right then,' Mrs. Mintern said. 'I make a motion we set up an ice-cream and soft drink stand in the filling station. Proceeds from sales to go towards expenses.'

'What expenses?' Purdy roared.

'The Hermit for instance,' Lucy reminded him.

There was a short silence. Thought was heavy in the little room.

'A good idea,' Celeste Cook said. 'I'll second that.'

'Now wait a minute,' Purdy stormed. 'What's the idea of giving a free dance if you fix it so nobody can make any money? Now you let me have my say, Tom Cook. Man and boy, I've been in Geneva for fifty years. Purdy's Parlour is an institution here. A real, honest place, not covered up with fancy names and foreign ideas. You're all newcomers here compared with me! I tell you I won't have it.'

'He may have a point,' Estes said mildly.

Tom Cook was firm on procedure. 'A motion has been made and seconded. I'm putting it to a vote. All in favour say Aye.'

The 'ayes' had it, with only Purdy's and Estes' vote being recorded in the 'no' column.

'The motion is passed. Mrs. Mintern, I'll appoint you a committee of one to take charge of the booth. Maybe your husband will help.'

'I'm sure he will,' Lucy said. 'And we'll donate the ice-cream.'

Purdy was on his feet. 'All right! All right. I knew I was a plain damfool to join this in the first place. Other people trying to tell me how to run my business, trying to tell me what to do. Well, you can sure count me out from now on! I quit.' He choked on further words, but his stride from the room was eloquent of his rage.

CHAPTER FOUR

NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD Amy Purdy cleared away the booth where the last customer had been, carried the dishes behind the counter. Purdy's Parlour ran to dark wood and old-fashioned drop lights instead of chromium and neon. The once flowered linoleum of the floor was worn, showed brown backing through violent roses. The sectional back mirror, marred with imperfections, was liberally sprinkled with such signs as, 'Don't stare at our help, you may be crazy yourself some day,' and, 'If your wife won't cook, don't shoot her, let us do the dirty work.'

Amy avoided the broken slat in the wooden grating behind the counter with the ease of long habit. She reached around the cash register, rapped sharply on the side window. She was scraping the plates, sliding them into hot, disinfectant water, when Dan Walters came in.

He was a short, stocky man, with dark complexion, and in his middle twenties. An unsatisfactory age to judge by the scowl he wore, an expression which was becoming habitual. 'How long are we going to have to do it like this, Amy?'

'You know I don't like it either. Did you come by the meeting?'

'I skulked past, peeked in the window. My usual way. Your old man's there with the rest, busy as bees. We're not kids, Amy. Why do we have to meet this underhand way?'

The girl took dishes from the hot water, rinsed them, piled them in the metal drain. She did not bother to answer Dan's question. She had heard it many times before, and knew he would go into the well-worn answers without prompting.

Her dark, shoulder-length hair framed a face that was sweet. Amy hated her face intensely, and to her, the word sweet was like a moving object to an enraged bull. In her day-dreaming moments, which were apt to be too few considering the work she did, she liked to think of herself as a sloe-eyed woman of mystery. The famous courtesan, directing the affairs of empire from a silken couch. She would return from her dream world to Purdy's Parlour, see her sweet face in the old mirror. Sweet and wholesome! Generous mouth, heart-shaped face with large brown eyes which were far more apt to be wistful than mysterious. She did approve of her body. Even the starched white uniforms of her working time, the blue jeans and shirt of her free moments, could not hide the rounded suppleness of her youth.

Dan Walters talked as if playing his thoughts on a well-worn gramophone record. 'So your Dad doesn't like my old man? Does he have to hold it against me? He'd change his tune if I made a little more money. And maybe I will. Amy, I talked to old Joe, the prospector. You know him. He may take me in on his mine.'

Amy was not impressed, moved her shoulders impatiently. 'You know he hasn't taken more than a few dollars from his diggings in more than twenty years. Do we have to waste our time talking and talking?' She leaned over the counter and he kissed her.

'That's much better,' Dan admitted. He smiled, and the tension lines were erased from his face, leaving it more boyish. But the change for the better was only momentary.

'Amy, let's run off tonight and get married. I have a few bucks, and I can get more.'

She put away the dried dishes. 'You know I can't do that. I can't run out on Pop that way. We've gone over that before.'

'Don't you love me?'

The girl tried to look enigmatic.

'What's the matter?' Dan asked in alarm. 'Something bite you?'

She was accustomed to such comments, shrugged and changed the subject. 'Are you going to the Cooks' open house next Sunday?'

'I suppose so. Might as well see how the other half will live this summer.'

'You shouldn't talk like that. You know it's swell of Celeste to have all the town people to the Tyrolean Room. Gee! Wouldn't that be a swell place to work, Dan?'

'Most anything would be an improvement over Purdy's Parlour,' Dan admitted. 'You going to be able to fix it so you can go with me?'

She shook her head. 'The only way Pop'll let me go is with Roger Estes.'

Dan hit the counter with his fist. 'What does your old man see so wonderful in him? A cook and bartender. Maybe he's got a little money. Or had outside money behind him. I tell you, Amy, that Estes is going to turn out to be a crook!'

'You shouldn't talk like that about Roger,' Amy said firmly. 'Because you know it's not true. And Roger is nice!'

'Nice, smice,' Dan grumbled. 'All right. At least I can see you there. Amy, I don't know how much longer I can stand it. I – well, I talked to Celeste Cook today.'

'You did? I sure wish I could have her for a friend. I mean a real friend.'

'Maybe she is a friend of yours,' Dan said slowly. 'And a friend of mine too. Amy, she said she'd loan me – us – one of her chalets, that duplex-chalet off by itself. Any time we want it between now and opening of fishing season. She said she'd see to it we weren't disturbed all night.'

It took a few moments for the meaning of the words to sink in. Amy felt her expression changing, and she was furious with herself. Certainly a woman of the world would not blush so furiously. She did her best to keep her voice level, tried to pattern it after the tones she believed Celeste Cook would have used, but she used it to express the immediate, defensive objections, which came to her mind. 'But Dan! We couldn't! Not here. I mean not so close to this place. It – it wouldn't be safe.'

'Safe as anywhere. Maybe safer. I've got it all worked out. Your old man lets you go down to Denver once in a while to stay over-night with that girl friend of yours, what's her name?'

'Priscilla. And she's my second cousin.'

'All right. You go down on the afternoon bus, and come back on the noon bus next day. That's right, isn't it?'

She nodded.

'So you fix it with your girl friend. She'll cover for you wouldn't she? I mean, she doesn't have to know everything, but you could get her to cover for you?'

'She might,' Amy admitted.

'Well, find out. Then you'd leave here on the bus. That's one thing your old man still has, the bus stop concession. So far. I'd be waiting for you down the road at Spruce Junction, and you'd get off there. We'd reverse the procedure on the way back. None of the drivers would say anything. You know how they all feel towards your Pop.'

'But – but suppose someone I knew got on the bus? Someone from here?'

'Not likely at this time of year. They're all too busy getting ready for the season. But if they did, I'd follow the bus right down to Denver. It – it means that much to me, Amy.'

'But Dan,' she wailed, 'we'd have to go right past here twice.'

'So what? You could scooch down in my coupé. Nobody would see you.' He saw her hesitation, played what he considered his trump card. 'If it wasn't all right, and safe, do you think Celeste would make such an offer?'

She had her palms flat on the dark counter, and she stared at him strangely.

The front door banged open. 'What's going on in here?' Purdy roared. 'No sooner my back is turned than I find you two carrying on.'

Dan heard Amy's sigh, her whisper, 'He's early. Please, Dan. Please!' He turned around slowly on the stool. 'This is a public place. No reason I shouldn't drop in for a cup of coffee, is there?'

'You bet there's a reason!' Purdy snapped. 'Like father like son. I don't want you hanging around here. That plain enough?'

Dan looked at the girl again, read the plea in her eyes and controlled his rising anger. He got to his feet. 'All right. You've made it plain enough. I hope I have too!' He hurried out into the night.

'Young fool,' Purdy muttered. 'What did he make plain? Now you listen to me, Amy. I told you I don't want that no-good loafer hanging around. I told you, didn't I?'

'He works hard,' Amy said.

'Piddling around. Fiddling around that filling station. Working for his father, who joins up with everyone else

in telling a man what he's got to do to run his own business.'

The girl was quick to grasp the way out. 'What's the matter, Pop? Did something happen at the meeting?' She almost added 'again' but stopped the word in time.

'They want to ruin me, that's what. Wanting to give away ice-cream. And then deciding to sell it themselves. That Mintern woman! Saucy young snip! I tell you I can smell a plot a mile away. But this plot ain't going to work! You just leave it to me, and I'll show them a thing or two yet.'

From past experience Amy knew the tirade would go on for some little time. She had heard it all before. She could let her mind wander down marble corridors to the tapestry-hung room where the palm leaf fan in the hands of the Nubian slave swayed gently back and forth in the perfumed air. And she herself reclined gracefully on the furs of the couch while her many suitors pleaded with her for her favours.

2

The single customer in the Corral Bar and Grill paid for his double shot and beer, went out to continue driving the heavy truck towards Denver.

Andy 'Red' Andrus looked up as his partner came in the back way. 'Meeting over, Rog? You might as well have stayed away longer. You saw the customer leaving, didn't you. Or maybe you should have left still earlier and gone calling.'

Estes took off his coat, hung it in a small closet and came out wrapping a clean apron around him. 'Gone calling? Where?'

'Our local eyesore. Purdy's Parlour. I saw young Dan Walters sneak in there a while ago. You don't take very good care of your girl, Rog.'

Estes smiled with his lips only. 'My girl? That's just wishful thinking.'

'You have the inside track, with old Purdy at least. He's never going to forgive George Walters for turning him in to the water board.' Andrus gave a good imitation of Purdy's voice when he went on, 'Man and boy, I've been dumping my garbage in Silver Creek for fifty years!'

Roger smiled a little more wholeheartedly. 'I guess there was an interruption anyway. Old Purdy left the meeting early. And you know, Red, it doesn't help too much to have the inside track with the father. I sometimes think I'd get along better with Amy if he didn't keep trying to throw us together.'

Andrus squinted at the polished surface of the bar which had cost eighty-five dollars a foot installed. 'I'd swear I'm beginning to rub a hole in the wood there. If you asked me, we might as well close up early. But O.K. if you want to stick to the regular hours. What was Purdy's beef about tonight?'

'Ice-cream,' Roger said.

Andrus nodded. 'Good a thing as any I guess. I always thought ice-cream was dangerous stuff. Taken in immoderation, I mean. I knew a feud started once over where a guy parked his car.'

'Not much parking problem around here,' Estes said. 'How much did we take in today?'

'Nine seventy-five.'

'Maybe we'll get a break on the weather for opening of fishing season this year.'

'That's one time,' Andrus said, 'when you always get a break on the weather. If it rains or snows, the fishermen

come in to get drunk enough to go out to fish a while more. And if it's nice they get their limit early and come in to get drunk enough to drive home. When is the street dance going to be?'

'The middle of June,' Estes told him. 'Might bring a good crowd for an off week-end.'

Red Andrus laughed. 'Now there's a time we'll have weather. I'll make you a small bet I can name a day and night in June when it'll rain, hail and snow.'

'No bet,' Roger said. He looked thoughtfully at his partner. Andrus began to fidget. His usually smiling red face took on a deeper hue. He pushed a broad but spotlessly clean hand through his flaming red hair. He picked up a beer glass he had already washed and polished, and polished it again.

'All right,' he said at last. 'You might as well spill it. What's on your mind?'

'Couple of strangers at the meeting tonight,' Estes said carefully. He no longer looked at his partner.

'So what?'

'They said they were going to be around for a while. Studying avalanches. They're staying at Alpine Lodge. And one of them packed a rod under his arm.'

'Oh. Oh. Dicks?'

Roger studied his nails. 'I've an idea you could answer that better than I could.'

Andrus put down the sparkling glass, turned to face Estes, with his huge hands on his heavy hips. 'What you mean by that?'

'I don't know that I mean anything. Maybe I'm just asking a question. You been getting impatient, Red?'

'Sure I have,' Andrus snapped. 'I've been getting mighty impatient. Here it is, spring, and the hills are turning green. So I think about green. The long green

stuff. That folds. But I'm clean, Rog. I haven't done a thing so the cops would be looking for me. Anyhow, what cop would have enough dough to stay at Alpine Lodge? But I gave you my word, didn't I? What kind of a louse do you think I am?'

Estes avoided the last question. 'I just wanted to be sure.'

'Well, be sure then. And don't go off half-cocked every time a couple of strangers hit town. It'd keep you busy this summer, I hope. I told you I'd play this straight, didn't I?'

'Yes. You told me,' Estes said. He took off his glasses, looked at his partner without them. 'And that's the way it's going to be, Andy.'

'Sure, sure,' Andrus said. He took the double shot glass from the water and began to polish it. He kept polishing until his hands stopped trembling.

3

Lucy Mintern pounded on the locked front door of the store under the sign MINTERN'S MERC. – Geneva Post Office, until her husband Bob came and let her in. He carried a sheaf of papers, and his good-natured face was creased in lines of unaccustomed worry. In his middle twenties, he had the build of an athlete or a Greek god. His roundish, ruddy face was good-looking in a boyish way, marred a bit by an undercurrent of petulance. The only son of a prominent and wealthy Denver family, his politician father had expected to 'do everything for the boy. Give him everything I didn't have.' Bob Mintern's determination to succeed on his own had had his wife's backing, at the time at least.

'Still at it, Bob?' Lucy said. 'I was afraid you wouldn't hear me, that you'd turned it off.'

The 'it' was the small hearing-aid which was barely noticeable in Mintern's ear. 'Still going strong,' he said. He kissed her lips, allowed himself to be pushed away without a struggle.

Lucy Mintern frowned, erased that expression a moment later when she saw her husband did not notice.

'Honest, Lucy,' Bob said, 'this flood of regulations is getting me down. Always something. There isn't time enough to fill out all the forms and tend to business too. If there was much business!'

'Plenty of customers,' she said. She made certain the store door was locked. Their living quarters, a neat, white bungalow with orange shutters, could be reached by going through the hardware storage department, through a back door, and along a stone path.

'Plenty of customers, sure. But how much cash do we take in? The last couple of months, everyone has been signing their tickets, and taking what cash they have to Denver to stock up at the super-markets. We're really digging deep to pay the wholesalers.'

'It's like this every spring,' Lucy said. 'And don't forget! It is spring. I refuse to worry. Fishing season opens soon, and people take care of their bills when the tourists start.'

'Can't be sure of anything nowadays,' Bob said. 'Not even tourists.'

'Now you sound like your father. Blame the administration! Stop worrying. It doesn't become you, and doesn't do any good. Get some meat out of the box, and I'll fix us some steak sandwiches.' She pulled open the door of the freezer, took out packaged and frozen french fried potatoes.

Bob grinned. 'That's one way a grocery is better than a diaper service. Anything happen at the meeting?'

'I'll say it did. I had some fun, Bob. About the first fun I've had all winter. And did that old goat, Purdy, get sore!'

Mintern frowned. 'What did he get sore about? I hope you didn't do anything to rile him?'

'All I have to do to rile him is be alive,' Lucy said. 'I still haven't forgiven him for sticking us so much for this store and buildings. He'll be sorry! I'll see to that. And I hit him where it hurt him tonight. The old miser! I'll bet he has a fortune stashed away.' She explained the ice-cream feud.

Her husband groaned. 'Honest, Lucy, I don't know why you have to go out of your way to stir up the man who still holds the mortgage on this place.'

'What can he do as long as you keep up the payments? And you know your father would come through to keep you from losing the store.'

Bob shook his head, and his face congealed into stubborn lines. 'I'll never ask him. Not after his telling me I couldn't make a go of this place.'

'Well, the mortgage shouldn't be very big by now. Goodness knows we've been scrimping and saving these last two years.' She had a sudden breathtaking suspicion. 'You have been paying him, haven't you?'

'Sure. There's nothing due now until the end of next month.' He tried a smile. 'What else would I do with money up here?'

'There's always the Cook woman,' Lucy said. She tossed her auburn hair, and her eyes glittered dangerously. 'Some day, I'm going to give myself the pleasure of wringing her neck. On general principles.'

'You saw the invitation to their yearly blow-out next Sunday?'

'I saw it. And we'll go, of course. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of staying away. But some day – well, I hope just one of her schemes goes sour!'

'It'd be more of a help to me,' Bob said, 'if you'd try to get along with the people in this town.'

'Town?' She packed derision into the word. 'If you think I'm going to cater to this bunch of worms and morons, who practically drool every time they think of the rich and successful Mrs. Cook, you've got another think coming!'

'I'm not asking you to cater,' Mintern said. He opened the meat display counter, selected two large pieces of pounded 'steak.'

'Oh no, you're not asking me to cater! Not much you aren't. You just want me to lie down and let them use me for a doormat! Being buried in a place like this until we can get together a little capital, is bad enough. I wonder if we'll ever be able to find a couple of as big suckers as we were? Oh well, we have our agreement. You run the store your own way, and I'll take care of the post office.' She laughed at a pleasant memory. 'Wasn't old Purdy fit to be tied when your father fixed it up for me to get the post office?'

'He was,' Mintern admitted. 'And speaking of the P.O. how did you make out with the Inspector today?'

'Fine, why not?'

Bob Mintern looked at the two pieces of meat which he had placed on the scale in an automatic gesture. He said, 'Steak sandwiches. You know what that reminds me of? Remember when we were first married? The steak sandwiches?'

'I remember,' Lucy said.

Bob's face softened for a moment, then hardened into a mask to hide his anticipation. 'Did you mean —?'

'That's more like it,' Lucy said briskly. 'And – we'll see.' She led the way through the rear of the store, and the clatter of her cuban-heeled oxfords covered the words her husband muttered.

'Not this time. Not again. Please not again.'

CHAPTER FIVE

JIM DUNN awoke suddenly in the engulfing softness of the double bed on his side of the duplex-chalet. A bed of coals still glowed in the small fire-place, so he knew he had slept only a few minutes. He heard voices, people moving around, and he heard them so clearly he thought for a moment Sarah and Zebulion had come into his side by mistake. He realised then that the sound which had awakened him was the closing of their door. He could hear their voices so plainly he could close his eyes and believe they were sitting at his bedside. The thin wall dividing the halves of the duplex, offered little hindrance to the passage of sound, a fact which was not so noticeable during the activities of the day.

'This really is a nice place,' Sarah Buck said. 'I like the gay colours Mrs. Cook has used. And I like the way she's had that little stream meander through the grounds in miniature waterfalls. I think they have a wonderful view from these windows and the little porches. Balconies.'

'But what don't you like? Buck asked.

Jim wondered if he should make some sort of noise, decided he had waited too long.

'Zebbie, did you notice Mrs. Cook's eyes?'

Zebulion was cautious. 'Not particularly. Why?'

'Oh – I just wondered. Do you think her eyes are the same colour mine are?'

Jim waited, then applauded silently when his partner answered, 'No eyes could be the same colour as yours.'

Jim relaxed, sought sleep.

Sarah Buck screamed. He jerked bolt upright.

'Zebbie! Look! What is it? Something – right there!

'A wood-tick,' Buck said soothingly. 'You know Mrs. Cook warned us they were out this time of year.'

'Well, don't just stand there. Get it off me! Zebbie! It's digging in!'

There were confused sounds through the partition. Jim fumbled on the night table and found a cigarette.

'There now,' Zebulion said. 'It's gone. Wait a minute. I have a first aid kit somewhere. Here it is. I'll put some iodine on it.'

A short silence.

'That's enough,' Sarah said. 'That – that thing was horrid. I hate it. Are there many of them around?'

Jim Dunn grinned at the real fear in Sarah Buck's voice. He grinned, because it was the first thing he had ever discovered of which Sarah was afraid. And he knew she had had many opportunities for fear on other occasions, since she had married Zebulion Buck when he was a bewildered, though wealthy, part Indian, lost in the maze of an Eastern University.

'This is the tick season,' Buck said. 'You'll have to watch out for them.'

'Darn it,' Sarah said. 'What's the point of coming to the mountains at this beautiful, uncrowded time of year, if you have to watch for nasty crawlies. And you won't tell me anything about your work, either.'

'Don't let it get you down,' Buck said heartlessly. 'You'd better get some sleep. That is, if you're still going with us tomorrow?'

'I've changed my mind,' she said. 'You go to sleep if you want to, Zebbie. I think I'll glance at those two books from the Cooks' rental library. I – well, I won't read that

one!' There was a thump as a book hit the floor. '*Kon-tiki*,' Sarah said. 'I couldn't enjoy it, thinking of the last part of the title. I missed this one of Graham Greene's when it came out a few years ago.'

There were rustlings and creakings as Buck settled in a more comfortable position. Then there was a small cry and a crash.

'Book no good?' Buck asked. 'Quick criticism to throw it across the room.'

'Zebbie! Do you know what? The main character – right on the first page – his name is *Tikki!*'

Jim Dunn started laughing. He kept it silent, but his soft bed quaked and quivered.

'Now what?' Zebulion demanded impatiently. 'Quit jiggling, Sarah.'

'It's not me,' she said in an awed voice. 'Zebbie, we're having an earthquake.'

Jim Dunn's laughter broke into sound. He suppressed it in time to make out the indignation in Sarah's voice.

'Jim Dunn! Come out from under there. What on earth are you doing?'

Jim choked on his laughter. 'Sorry. But really I'm next door in my own little nest. The acoustics are excellent even though the walls and foundations aren't. But what do you expect for twenty-five dollars a day?'

There was a long silence from the other half of the chalet-duplex, and Jim could almost hear Sarah running over in her mind all the things she had said.

'You might have been a gentleman and coughed or something,' she complained.

Jim apologised again. Silence settled down. Jim was almost asleep when he heard Sarah's voice again.

'I'll bet Celeste Cook recommended those books on purpose. And you know what, Zebbie?'

'Um?' said Buck.

'I'll bet she *thinks* her eyes are the same colour as mine.

2

During the following days, Jim and Zebulion learned a great deal about Fred Roane's southern territory, even if they did not find out much about the man himself. Roane was quite willing to talk, to answer questions which pertained to his work. Yet he never volunteered information, always kept up a barrier of reserve. And as days passed he might as well have had no personal life in so far as it intruded into his conversation.

Jim and Buck soon fell into the habit of riding silently in the green forestry pick-up, or the four-wheel-drive jeep. They could sit back and enjoy the trips along narrow mountain roads, or on the forestry work trails where plentiful signs warned away all traffic.

'How about that?' Jim asked once. 'Do those signs mean what they say? Can't the public use these roads?'

'At their own risk,' Roane explained. 'The idea of the signs, aside from discouraging some people, is to remove responsibility from the department, for accidents. Which are bound to happen.'

And on some of the trails, 'work roads' by courtesy only, the partners saw what Roane meant. The reddish brown trails started off innocently enough through thick groves of aspen which were beginning to show the delicate green of new leaves. In the lower meadows the pasque flowers were out, pushing up at times through a thin covering of old snow. But the trails went upward quickly, back into a land where winter still held all growth in check. Where the beaver ponds were still choked with

greying ice, where the aspen branches were bare, where the hardy willows showed no signs of life.

Yet in places where strong sunlight hit longest, there was a tension in the earth, with its sere covering of brown grasses. There was a quiet and a hush, but the hush of promise, of the expectancy of life.

In places where the trails whipped back and forth above timberline in the struggle to reach some more sheltered valley, the road was often blocked by twenty- and thirty-foot snow-drifts. Hard crusted, the drifts bore the weight of a man with ease, and at times Roane would drive the jeep over a rounded snow mound. But usually the drifts were a signal for non-mechanical means of transportation. They walked.

Roane always led the way, setting the pace to his own satisfaction, and often leaving the partners gasping and struggling along in the rarefied air.

While Roane inspected government camp sites and picnic grounds, the partners looked at the paths of avalanches. One by one the marks on the aerial map were crossed off, or highlighted with a special circle which meant further examination might be necessary in late summer when the ice and snow would be more dissolved.

At times the day's search would be entirely at lower elevations, and then there was the necessity of a constant lookout for wood-ticks. Of the three men, only Zebulion appeared immune to their attacks. He was even inclined to chuckle at the discomfort of his companions, and Fred Roane at least bore his gibes in a curiously restrained silence.

Jim Dunn was more vocal. 'Don't they have shots to keep these things from giving you fever?' he wanted to know as he held a glowing cigarette near the end of a tick which had burrowed deeply.

'Sure,' Roane said. 'But the shots aren't used much any more. They're worse than the fever if it's treated right away with one of the antibiotics.'

All during the search of the southern part of the territory, the good weather held. There were only occasional high altitude snow squalls, and one or two thunder showers at the lower elevations. The circle markings had all been visited on the Saturday before the opening of the fishing season.

'We'll take tomorrow off,' Buck decided. 'And Monday we'll tackle the Red Cone area.'

3

'We don't have to go,' Sarah Buck said. 'But I think it would be fun.'

'I'm resting,' Zebulion said.

'Of course. Jim, wouldn't you like to go?'

'Why not?' Dunn asked. 'We can leave the old timer here to get a good nap. I'd rather like to see this blow-out.'

'Who's an old timer?' Zebulion asked. 'Oh, all right. I'll go. But I'll probably bite somebody's head off.'

'It was nice of Mrs. Cook to send us the special invitation. I gather this is just for the locals.' Sarah already had the closet door open, was sorting through hangers.

Buck said, 'We don't have to dress, do we? I hadn't even planned on shaving today.'

Sarah hummed a little to herself, clacked the hangers. Zebulion and Jim Dunn went to their respective rooms to make themselves presentable.

CHAPTER SIX

A DOZEN cars of all makes and varying years were parked in the circle behind the wire fence which screened one side of the swimming pool, giving a small forecast of the busy season to come. There was one difference. Now all of the cars bore the number of the local county, but, in the season, licences from every state in the union would be represented.

The swimming pool was filled, but the water was not heated. It still carried the extreme chill of snow waters that fed it through a series of miniature cascades and a more practical underground six-inch pipe. A wide stone terrace, empty now of the beach chairs, tables and coloured umbrellas which would appear later, separated the pool from the entrance of the Tyrolean Room.

Each year the cocktail lounge was opened first, completely ready for the summer trade by the time Celeste Cook gave her open house. Each year the main lodge with its massive field-stone fireplaces which would take six-foot logs was ready and waiting for the opening, the day before the 25th when fishing season began. More than slightly envious business people who catered to the tourist trade – though to a different class or at least a different price class – said it was easy for Celeste to have things run smoothly when she made so much money. The fact they were getting the result before the cause still gave them a satisfactory alibi for the usual crisis which always came with the influx of customers.

The Tyrolean Room itself, wide, with a low, polished beamed ceiling, had huge picture windows facing the pool and the distant snow covered peaks. Across the end nearest the kitchen was a long bar, presided over by bartenders in Tyrolean costumes. The small tables were served by attractive girls in similar outfits. The open house served a double purpose. It brought a certain amount of goodwill from the local people, but more than that, it served as a dress rehearsal, gave the help an opportunity to lose their self-consciousness in their costumes.

All available wall space was hung with trophies and souvenirs of high mountain sports. Skis, snow-shoes, crampons, pitons, ropes, saddles, bridles, pack trip equipment, glass-cases of brilliantly coloured flies and expensive fly rods.

Celeste Cook surveyed her preparations. 'All right,' she said. 'You can open the doors, Paddy.'

Paddy, a heavy-set bartender, walked slowly from behind the shelter of the bar. 'Damned if I don't feel silly,' he muttered.

'You may,' Celeste said heartlessly, 'but you'll get used to it.' This evening, as hostess, she had chosen a colour and type of costume she was positive no one else could approach. A silver mist cashmere wool cut to the pattern of a ski outfit, exaggerated, but faintly recognisable. Her smooth golden hair and the threads of silver through the wool made her a shimmering figure. The tight, but full sleeved jacket was brought in at the wrists with wide gold bracelets. The voluminous ski trousers, brought in at the ankles, were set off by gold sandals and made her look a trifle more Oriental than out-doorish. Around her waist she had many folds of violet chiffon, the exact shade of her rather small eyes.

That shade was repeated in the large amethyst she wore on her wedding finger.

She watched Paddy amble towards the doors, automatically checking details of his costume, making mental notes for some revisions. Always at this moment, she felt a breathless expectancy which resembled the first curtain on opening night.

'Open the doors, Paddy,' she repeated.

2

Sarah Buck sat at a small table near the windows, flanked by Jim and Zebulion, and all sipping tall drinks. 'Quite a place,' Sarah admitted. 'And our hostess cuts quite a figure.'

'Hasn't she though?' Jim Dunn agreed.

Sarah made a face at him. She was tiny, trim, poised and alert, observing the gathering as an outsider, but putting anyone with whom she came in contact at ease. She had sacrificed her long hair, wore it now in a neat black cap which made her perfect features more piquant than ever. Her Boston background was evident in her soft voice, her quiet manner, her slender hands and feet. Her cinnamon coloured one-piece suede dress was severely cut, with a wide black belt; sleeveless but with a high neck. Sarah Buck had the happy faculty of enjoying herself almost anywhere, and others could not help responding to the contagion of her pleasure. She brought so much to any group, to any situation or place, there was no room for boredom, feigned or actual.

Jim Dunn nodded to several men in their Sunday best, men he knew he must have met at the civic meeting. Men closely shaven, still glistening with soap and water.

Men accompanied by their dowdy but cheerful wives with a pronounced tendency towards brilliantly flowered silk prints.

But the central point of attention at the moment was the bar, where Harlan Purdy held forth. Purdy held a long glass, filled with very amber liquid in a red hand. He resembled a turkey in blue serge.

'I don't hold with drinking,' Purdy said. 'At least only on special occasions. And I don't hold grudges, or I wouldn't be here.' He drained his glass, had it refilled. 'Man and boy,' he went on, 'I've been in Geneva for fifty years, and I've seen some changes. Mostly I don't like them. Mostly they're a bunch of foolishness. Some might be called good, and we have to take the bitter with the sweet. So I propose our yearly toast to our hostess – one of the sweetest of the sweet!'

The toast met enthusiastic response as far as drinking was concerned.

Celeste Cook's rather husky voice said, 'Why, how very nice!' but her eyes added, 'You old goat!'

3

Red Andrus sat at the bar, deep in talk with the bartender Paddy. The party had reached an ambulatory stage so Jim walked over and sat down. Andrus picked up his glass quickly and the bartender began an industrious polishing of the bar surface.

'Something for you, sir?'

Jim gave an order. 'Quite a party,' he said to Red.

'Yeah.' Andrus said. He got to his feet. 'I have to be going, so Roger can take his turn and come.'

'So long then,' Jim said calmly. He accepted the full

glass Paddy put before him. 'Red a friend of yours?' he wanted to know.

'Red? You mean the gentleman who just left, sir?' Hooded eyes were fishy in the blank stare. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I never saw the gentleman before in my life.'

4

Bob Mintern said jovially, 'Our last Sunday off! After this Mintern's Merc. will be open all hours.' He had a glass of beer in his hand, and he carried it with him from group to group. Lucy followed him at first, but she soon grew tired of his gregariousness and returned to the bar. Lucy should have been one of the most attractive women at the party. Young, but not too young, with a supple, slender figure with small firm breasts and sleek hips. She had added an obvious tint to her auburn hair which was curled too tightly. Her green eyes were not helped by too much mascara, and the dinner dress she wore was the wrong shade of green. Not bottle, not sage, not lime, but raw. Her mouth was sulky, as she finished her long drink, but the expression changed as Roger Estes and Amy Purdy came into the room. She waited until they selected a table near that occupied by Sarah and Zebulion, then walked over and sat down.

'Hi, Amy,' she said sweetly.

'Mrs. Mintern,' Amy said. 'You look so nice!'

Lucy surveyed herself with satisfaction, was willing to admit the truth of the statement.

Roger Estes said, 'Won't you join us?'

Lucy made a face at him. 'Is that nice? Or are you telling me I'm not wanted?'

'Why of course you're wanted,' Amy said. 'Isn't it a

wonderful party?' Her thick black hair was rich in the lamplight and her brown eyes were filled with excitement.

Lucy tossed cold words to dampen enthusiasm. 'You haven't been here very long. Wait a while.' She let her eyes wander in a long summing up of the parts of Amy she could see.

The girl had come into the Tyrolean Room feeling she looked her nicest. She wore her best dress of flowered pink and blue voile with ruffles around the neck. She wore an old-fashioned heart on a slightly brassy chain, and had a heart bracelet to match. Her skirt was long and full, hid her rounded legs, but let the tips of her patent leather slippers show at Lucy's side of the table.

Amy's well rounded arms and throat took on a richer colour under Lucy Mintern's scrutiny. She said, 'Is – is something the matter?'

Lucy laughed. 'No, you little dear, of course not. Well, if you insist on asking, I wouldn't — '

'May I join you?' Sarah Buck stood at the table, gave her name. Roger pulled out a chair for her and the worry lines on his forehead smoothed out. 'You're Amy Purdy, aren't you? And Mrs. Mintern? I was at the next table and thought I might as well get into the nice little chat. Amy, would you mind my saying I think you're beautiful?'

Amy Purdy looked at this vision of a woman with awe. Rather suspicious awe, for the first moments. 'Isn't it a swell party?' she asked timidly.

'It's lovely,' Sarah Buck said. 'I'm having lots of fun.'

Lucy Mintern laughed.

Sarah favoured her with a sweet smile. 'Oh my dear, what a shame,' she sympathised with Lucy.

'Shame?' Lucy gasped.

'Yes. A dreadful shame your sweet dress didn't shrink

to fit you when you got it wet and it faded to that ghastly shade.'

Lucy Mintern tried to stand her ground. 'So nice of you to notice,' she said with broad sarcasm.

'But my dear!' Sarah shrugged hopelessly. 'Who could help noticing?'

Lucy got to her feet, swept away to the bar and called loudly for a double shot.

Amy Purdy giggled. 'I shouldn't laugh,' she apologised. 'I know I shouldn't. But I can't help it.'

Sarah Buck stood up. Roger Estes was on his feet. He said, 'Thank you, very much.'

Amy followed Sarah's progress back to her own table with eyes filled with adoration.

5

Jim Dunn had returned to the table with Zebulion, and both men greeted Sarah with smiles.

'Winning friends?' Jim asked.

'We couldn't help overhearing the performance,' Buck said. 'Went out of your way, didn't you?'

Sarah smiled happily. She watched Estes and Amy lean closer together across the little table. 'No trouble at all,' Sarah said. 'A pleasure.' She made certain her voice would not carry beyond their own table. 'When you see a sweet girl, really having fun, really enjoying herself, it's something to be guarded '

'I didn't hear you tell her she was sweet. Or wholesome, which is a word that comes to my mind,' Zebulion said.

'Darling,' Sarah said. 'I worry about you sometimes.'

'Good,' Zebulion said. 'Worry about me now. I want

to go home. Oh – hello, Roane. Have you met Mrs. Buck?'

Fred Roane acknowledged the introduction. He said, 'You two ready for a hard day tomorrow?'

'Why not?' Jim asked. 'We've had hard days in the past.'

Roane tipped his glass, sipped the dark liquid. 'Root beer,' he explained. 'Never touch hard liquor any more. Slows you up on the trail. Well, pleased to have met you, Mrs. Buck. I'll be by for you two early in the morning. We'll take the jeep as far as we can.'

Fred Roane walked away to the bar, Celeste Cook sat down beside him on a stool.

Jim Dunn said, 'He looks too happy, Zeb. I guess we're really in for a rough one tomorrow. Maybe we better go into training.'

Sarah Buck laughed. 'I don't think a few drinks will slow you up too much. He's having a heart to heart talk with Celeste. Now, there are some things worse than liquor. Oh – good evening, Mr. Cook. We want to thank you for a most pleasant party.'

Tom Cook's eyes were on the couple at the bar, on his wife's golden head bending closer to that of the ranger. Apparently the discussion was important.

'So glad,' Cook said. He refused an invitation to sit down, circulated around the room until his wanderings somehow put him on a stool adjoining that of his wife.

Sarah sighed.

Jim Dunn made preliminary motions of getting up.

Sarah said suddenly, 'Who is the young scowler just coming in? Oh, I remember him at the filling station. Service with a smile. Perhaps he doesn't use smiles when he's off work, but what an expression to bring to a party!'

6

Dan Walters went directly to the table occupied by Amy and Roger Estes. The girl looked up and the animation died away from her face.

'Sorry I'm late, Amy,' Walters said. 'Come on, let's go.'

Roger got to his feet. 'Sit down if you want to, but remember Amy is here with me.'

'I'm not talking to you,' Dan snapped. 'Come on, Amy,' he added impatiently. 'We were swamped at the station all at once, and I had a bad time getting away.'

Estes said mildly, 'Mr. Purdy put Amy in my care. If you choose to express it like that. One condition was that I was not to allow her to go off with you alone. I'll make no objections if you care to join us.'

Amy Purdy's happiness had evaporated. She said, 'I – Oh please, Dan.'

'I want to talk to you,' Dan said firmly. 'You know it's important. The days are passing. Season opens Friday. We – haven't much time.' He turned again towards Roger. 'I'm not asking your permission for anything. Amy is coming with me.'

The usual hum of talk had subsided. The threesome at the table were the centre of attraction. Jim Dunn got his legs under him, started getting up. He was much too late.

Roger Estes said, 'No, she isn't.'

'Get back to your kitchen,' Dan snarled. He swept out one fist. Estes moved his head quickly, but not quite quickly enough. His glasses flew from his nose, crashed

across the room. Estes stepped forward on the balls of his feet. He was smiling. His left hand darted out, and Dan's head jerked up, in perfect position for the right cross which followed.

Dan Walters hit the floor on his shoulder blades, lay still.

Roger Estes blew on his knuckles, said, 'He'll be all right, Amy.'

The girl pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, ran from the room.

7

Sarah, Zebulion and Jim sat in the Buck half of the duplex-chalet before an open fire, having a nightcap.

'Quite a party,' Sarah said.

'Surprising man, Estes,' Jim admitted. 'That was about as short a fight as I've seen. And in a way I'm glad. Another minute I'd have felt called on to try to separate the gladiators. I always get slugged when I try to stop someone else fighting.'

'That car's stopping here,' Sarah said.

Buck went to the door, opened it. He said, 'For goodness sake what happened to you?' He stepped aside to let Fred Roane limp in. His right ankle was heavily bandaged and he used a gnarled cane for support.

He grinned weakly.

'Sit down,' Jim said. 'And tell us. A short while ago you were brimming over with life and good hints for good health. Now look at you.'

Roane grimaced. 'It's the way things go.' He lowered himself into a chair. 'I get so used to wearing boots, I forget how to walk when I wear oxfords. Sprained my

ankle. Guess you'll have to count me out on the trip tomorrow. But you can come by and get the jeep. You'll need it.'

Jim and Buck made polite noises of sympathy.

'I'd like to ask a favour of you though,' the ranger went on. 'I don't think it'll be a great deal extra trouble.'

'Sure,' Buck said. 'If we can do it.'

Roane asked for the map and the aerial photographs. 'This is the Red Cone slide area you're visiting tomorrow. Here's the trail up to this big slide. You can see the winding light line. I don't know how far you can get in with the jeep, but I'm pretty sure you won't be able to go all the way. Even though it's been so unseasonably warm. But you can see the trail goes on past the slide area. Up this way. There's a prospector's cabin up there. Old Joe winters alone and he ought to be out by now. He'll be running short of supplies. Will you walk in and check on the old man? It's not more than three quarters of a mile.'

'We won't need the walk,' Jim said, 'but we'll do it for you. And if we find him all right?'

'Just let him alone. Better call before you get too close. He doesn't care much for visitors. He's been alone so much he gets suspicious.'

'All right,' Buck agreed. 'And we'll come by for the jeep.' He rubbed his forehead. 'I guess we'd better get an early start.'

Jim helped the ranger to his feet, held the door open for him, waited until the pick-up drove away.

Sarah Buck looked at her husband thoughtfully, then favoured Jim with the same glance.

'What have you boys done to make the ranger mad at you?'

'Nothing I know of,' Buck said. 'Why?'

'Maybe he doesn't want to associate with drunks,' Jim suggested.

Buck said irritably, 'What are you two talking about?'

'Didn't you notice?' Sarah asked in surprise. 'Both coming in and going out, Roane forgot on which ankle he was limping.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE two partners rounded a bend in the narrow, treacherous trail, and came into a small valley. The forestry jeep was a good hour below them. It had foundered in a drift, and they had worked some time to get it out, and turned around.

Jim Dunn straightened up, eased his heavy pack. He whistled. 'There's a big one,' he said.

High above them, far beyond the last line of stunted trees, the side of the mountain was polished smooth. Sunlight made warm colours on the rock there, yet only managed a depressing grey on the tangled mass of boulders, splintered trees, old snow and ice which had spilt down on to the floor of the little valley. The avalanche had roared across to the opposite side wall, had dammed a little creek until spring sun had given water new life and the strength to tunnel and corrode until it found a way to answer gravity. Around the edges of the slide area, warmth had already removed cementing ice and had left matted wood, torn roots and haphazard boulders.

Buck and Jim picked their way cautiously through the jumbled edge. In the shade a damp, penetrating cold enveloped them. 'Thirty degrees cooler inside,' Jim said. They reached the main part of the slide which still towered a good fifteen feet above their heads.

'Might as well go up and look around,' Buck said. 'At least get up in the sunlight. You know, Jim, maybe

Roane had something after all. Maybe I should have stuck to root beer last night too.'

'Just getting old,' Jim suggested. He led the way in a sliding scramble to the smoother surface of the top of the slide, where sun had already melted away some irregularities. 'Look around!' Jim panted. 'I'm getting tired looking at these things. If you ask me, you see one, you've seen them all. And beside that, you could lose a fleet of transport planes in this mess, let alone — ' He stopped suddenly. 'Oh. Oh. Something new has been added.'

Buck slipped straps from his shoulders, let his pack hit the ice, before he turned to follow the direction Jim pointed.

In the partial shelter of a huge rounded boulder was a footprint. At least at one time in the past it had been a depression made by a human foot. Now, the snow once packed by weight of the step, had resisted to a greater degree the melting process than had the surrounding surface. The print stood an inch and a half high, etched in reverse.

Jim dropped his own pack, searched for more prints. He thought he found fragments of several others. 'Visitors,' he said. 'And after the avalanche came down. But a long time ago. Maybe months.'

'Mutter, mutter,' Zebulion said. 'You know you're getting the habit of talking to yourself?'

'It's the way my mutter brought me up,' Jim said absently. He followed the path of the slide upwards in careful scrutiny. 'We're going to have fun, Zeb. Look up there, where the crack or ledge runs slantwise across the slide path. You see something shiny?'

'I see it,' Buck admitted. 'And I suppose we'll have to climb up and investigate. Right now I could use some coffee.'

'And a sandwich or three,' Dunn said. 'Funny how much easier it is to carry food inside you than in a pack. And speaking of packs, it looks as if all the hardware we've been toting might come in handy after all.' He sat down on a rock, undid straps. 'That sun's sure hot. You wouldn't think you could get broiled on a hunk of ice would you.' He found the sandwiches, unwrapped them. 'What'll you have? Here's tired fried egg, or —' he looked more closely inside two slabs of bread, bent closer and sniffed. 'Damned if I know what this is. A Purdy Special I guess.'

'I'll take a chance,' Buck said. 'Coffee is the main thing I want.' He shivered in spite of the sun's glare. He poured from the quart thermos into the plastic top, handed it to Dunn in exchange for the mystery sandwich. He drank from the thermos thirstily.

Jim took one sip of his coffee, along with a bite of egg sandwich. 'Never did see how you could drink coffee so hot.' He put the plastic cup down on the ice.

'That's going to slide down,' Buck warned. 'Prop it there against that little mossy rock.'

Dunn slid the cup to the upper side of the small outthrust. 'Funny looking moss,' he commented idly. He looked closer, choked down his mouthful of egg. 'Funny looking rock, in fact. First time I ever saw a rock with a nose. That isn't moss, Zeb, that's snow mould.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

JIM DUNN stopped chopping ice with the short handled axe he had carried in his pack. Grey tendrils of mould did not extend beneath the packed snow, stopped at the line where sun and warmth could not yet reach.

'All yours, Zeb. The hand and right arm is uncovered.' He did not mention the staring, open eyes.

Buck took papers, an ink pad, cardboard and manila envelopes from his own pack. He inked stiff fingers, pressed them against prepared paper. He compared the result with sets of fingerprints he had brought along 'We've come to the right place, Jim. But this is the pilot. We'll have to look around some more.'

'You're hard to satisfy,' Jim said. A vagrant breeze circled back from the steep slope beyond. Jim stood still, sniffing. He walked a few yards, to a point where he could see the upthrust roots of an alpine spruce, walked past the spot where the raised footprint glittered now in its few minutes of sun. He came back more quickly. 'Give me that ink pad and the papers,' he said. 'There's something looks like a bundle of rags caught in those roots.'

Zebulion did not argue, just handed over the equipment and sat down. Jim started to kid about his partner's lack of interest, decided to save his breath for the climb ahead. It was rough, slippery going, and the hundred yards took the better part of a half hour.

'It's a body all right,' Jim called down. 'And there's a piece of the plane here too. Not a very big piece, Buck.

They must have hit hard.' There was a short silence, and Jim called again. 'You want anything else but the prints?'

'Might look in the pockets,' Buck suggested. 'The passenger was carrying a lot of cash.'

It was not long before Jim came scurrying and sliding down to join his partner. 'Nothing in the pockets,' he reported. 'Funny thing too. I wonder if that man was in the habit of wearing his pockets inside out?' He handed over the sets of prints he had taken.

Buck finished his comparison. 'That's that. All we have to do now is send these to Washington, report to the Denver headquarters, and then we'll have our celebration.'

'If you're satisfied, I guess I am,' Jim said slowly. 'Did you hear me when I said the pockets were inside out?'

'You think someone's already gone through the pockets? Couldn't they have been torn like that from the crash?'

Dunn remembered the wreckage which had been a man. 'Anything could have happened in that crash,' he admitted. 'But there's still the footprint.'

Buck said, 'The money could be anywhere, from what you said. And maybe the pilot lived long enough to walk around a little.'

'What the hell you two doing?'

Jim and Buck whirled around to see the scowling face of Dan Walters, showing over the lip of the avalanche. Now their concentration on their task had been diverted, they could hear the sound of voices, the clang of horses' feet against rock.

Jim said, 'Well well, the last time I saw you you were demonstrating the horizontal man. What brings you here?'

Dan came the rest of the way up on to the smoother surface. 'I asked what you two were doing here.' There was no diminishing of the belligerency.

Zebulion took two steps forward. 'I might ask the same of you. You go around asking for it, don't you?'

'Hey,' Jim said. He stepped quickly between the two men. 'Hold it a minute, Zeb.' He knew his partner well enough to realise Buck was on the verge of attack.

Zebulion rubbed his hand across his forehead. 'He still hasn't answered my question.' He seemed a trifle puzzled as to why he should be so angry.

'And you haven't answered mine,' Dan said. 'I found this wreck. I've reported it. I even climbed up and brought down a piece of the tail. I found this wreck, and any reward belongs to me. Do you understand?'

'You're clear enough,' Jim said. 'And also, you're going off half-cocked. Just because you're a money hungry reward hunter doesn't mean everyone else is.' He was deliberately insulting to draw Walters' attention from his partner to himself. Buck worried him. He hoped it was the altitude, but whatever the reason, Zebulion was on the edge of blowing his top, and when he did that, someone was going to get hurt.

Dan Walters grinned unexpectedly. 'All right. If you're not after the reward, I'll even apologise if you want it that way.'

Tom Cook scrambled over the edge of the slide, followed in a moment by two men in overalls, ranchers by their appearance. They nodded to Buck and Jim, so it was fair to suppose they had been at the party.

Cook said, 'What goes on? Mr. Buck, you and your friend do get around!'

Walters pointed at the pilot's body. 'You see? I was right. These men have uncovered this body a little, And the other one is farther up, wedged in a tree root. That's where I found a piece of the plane's tail. So I want you all to witness my claim to any reward.'

'I'm here in my capacity as Deputy Sheriff,' Cook said. 'These two men are employees of the county at this time, and paid by the county. Mr. Buck, do either of you want to put in a counter claim?'

Jim answered quickly, 'Not us. We don't want any reward. If there is one. We're through here. Our interest is — '

'In avalanches,' Buck finished.

'That why you came here?' Cook asked.

'Partly. And Roane asked us to go on up and see if the old prospector is all right.' Jim started redoing his pack quickly. He saw that Zebulion had somehow managed to stow away any equipment which might give contrary evidence to their story of Avalanche Control experts.

Buck said, 'I'm glad the officials are here. We'll leave it with you. We were afraid we'd have to waste the rest of the day reporting this.' He led the way over the edge of the slide.

Jim followed more slowly, turned when his head was just clearing the edge, for a last look. Three of the men were bending over the pilot's body. The fourth, Dan Walters, was kicking at the raised footprint, erasing it thoroughly.

Once again on more level ground, Jim demanded, 'You feel all right, Zeb? What got into you?'

'Just dizzy for a minute,' Buck said. 'I'm all right now. I guess I jumped up too quickly. Let's go find the prospector. Old Joe.'

2

Twice on the way up the steep trail towards the place where Roane had told them they would find the pros-

pector's cabin, Jim and Buck found footprints. One set, in a shaded place, was still partially frozen, while the other, more exposed, was crumbling back to mud in the sun's heat. But the peculiar square-toed tracks both pointed downhill.

'I don't think we're going to find anybody home,' Jim said as he reached the top of a steep pitch. 'But either I'm getting better at walking or for once the ranger's distance was about right. We haven't come much over a half mile, and there's the shack.'

'We've come far enough,' Buck said. He raised his voice. 'Hello the house!'

An echo came back from a nearby bare cliff as the two men waited.

The very low rock and log cabin, with a huge chimney making up the whole north side, was well protected from the winter winds. Yet even at this late day in May, the drifts were piled many feet high where the snow had been dropped by prevailing winds.

No smoke came from the chimney. The only door, which faced due south, was closed. But it was locked only against predatory animals other than human. A copper wire served as a latch string, let the heavy door swing wide.

Mid-day warmth had brought several heavy green-bodied flies to buzzing life. They hummed and circled around the jagged openings in a can of condensed milk on the table. Buck picked it up, shook it. Only a thin film of liquid covered the bottom of the can, a film in which a trapped fly buzzed a last protest. They found no food, no personal belongings except a half case of dynamite inside the oven of the rusty cookstove.

They went outside, yelled a while. They found the entrance to the mine shaft, which was not long and easily

proved empty. They found the prospector's storage hole, well away from the cabin, where emergency rations and blankets could be stored in case of winter fire in the larger structure. Still no food, only three ragged blankets.

'He's gone all right,' Buck said. 'I guess he made those tracks we found on his way out.'

'If I were guessing,' Jim said slowly, 'I'd say those tracks were made at least two days ago. In late afternoon, probably, because one set we found was still frozen and won't get sun until around three-thirty or so. And I'd say they had thawed and frozen at least once since they were made.'

Buck said, 'That should have given him time to let Roane know.'

Jim shrugged. 'Guess he forgot to check in. Or maybe he came over a little drunk somewhere. Which, if you ask me, would be a good idea after wintering up here by yourself.'

'A good idea anyway,' Buck said. 'Right now at least.'

'Let's get going then,' Jim said. 'Tell you what though. On the way down – when we get past the place where we found the prints, I mean – we'll keep our eyes open. You watch one side and I'll take the other. There are a good many places where the old man could have taken a fall.'

'We didn't see anything on the way up,' Buck said.

'Were you looking? I wasn't.'

In spite of their careful scrutiny, they went down considerably faster than they had come up, soon passed the base of the avalanche where four men were now hard at work uncovering a portion of the plane wreckage. Two canvas-wrapped objects were in handy position for transport down.

Jim asked, 'Is there a government reward for finding the plane?'

'I don't know,' Buck said. 'That's not my department.'

'Our young friend is going to be awfully disappointed if there isn't.'

Buck thought he at least would be able to bear up under any such disappointment for Walters.

'I still wonder if he was the first to find the wreck.'

'You're thinking of the footprint? We don't know how it was made. Might be one of the victims staggered a few paces.'

'Maybe the pilot,' Dunn admitted. 'We didn't uncover him entirely. But not the other one. Seems funny to me the old prospector didn't find the plane. He might have heard something, come down later to investigate.'

Buck said, 'There was a bad storm when the plane crashed. I don't think anyone would be able to hear – hey! Put out your hand when you're going to stop in a narrow place like this. That drop away is too sheer.'

'Sure is,' Jim admitted. 'I remember this baby from the trip up. Kept my eyes pretty close to the trail. But look over the side there. Something's gone down recently.'

'Probably the horses kicked a rock over,' Buck said reasonably.

'Could be,' Dunn said. 'That's real rock slide. Wouldn't take much to start her a-rolling down. See where it ends up there in that gulch? In the heavy brush and timber. We can't see much from up here.'

Buck picked up a head-sized rock, tossed it from the trail. It struck another stone. The stone moved. The whole slide appeared to quiver. Rocks moved, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. But only a small area was affected, poured down into the gully below and disappeared in the brush.

Jim shook his head. 'I wouldn't want to try to climb down there.'

'Think it's worth while?'

'It's the last bad place until we get to the jeep.'

Buck sighed. 'All right. I suppose we'll have to take a look then. If for no other reason than so we won't feel we have to come back up here. Let s see. We can go down the trail a way, about to the level of that gulch. Then we can cut back along it.'

'Looks easy enough from here,' Jim said.

They had to travel down trail a good five hundred yards before they came level with the floor of the gulch. Jim whistled. 'Doesn't look so easy from here,' he said ruefully. The gully was choked with a tangled mass of dead, blown-down timber. 'This may take a little time.'

It took more than an hour of hot, hard work, to make a way through the wind-tangled mass which had once been a forest. Where there were not tangled branches and trunks of huge trees, there was thick, heavy brush, interlacing odd fragments.

Buck mopped his face, looked at his hand, which was not damp. 'If I'd known it was going to be like this I'd have taken a chance on the slide. Just a sacrifice on the altar of thoroughness.'

'You didn't say anything about staying behind.' Jim was dripping wet with his exertions. 'Let's see now. There's the slide, and a piece of the trail up there. Anything coming down would hit the brush about there.' He walked to the spot he had picked out. 'Now if it weren't for all these loose rocks, I'd — ' he stopped, drew in a deep breath.

Buck pushed up behind his partner. He felt that strange dizziness again. He shook his head to clear his vision. 'A boot,' he said. 'A peculiar, square-toed boot.'

Dunn was already tossing rock, and Buck tried to help.

He stopped when black and purple spots started sailing before his eyes. It did not take Jim long to find out there was a leg inside the boot. Nor did it take much longer to make certain the man had been dead for some time. A day at least.

Jim straightened up, rubbed the kinks from his back. 'You stick around here, Zeb. I'll go back and get our local law and order. Maybe we get a break, having a deputy so handy.'

'You going to try the slope?'

'Not me,' Jim said. 'This is a case when the longest way round is the shortest way home. And why? Because you'd never get home, if you tried that slide.'

3

Zebulion Buck sat for a few minutes on a boulder, full in the heat of the sun. He didn't feel very warm, but he got up slowly, moved a few steps to a partial shade of a mahogany bush. The effort required full concentration of will power.

He felt better even in the scant shade. Buck fumbled in his pocket, took out a cigarette, lit it. He broke the match carefully, concentrated on making certain it was out. He shook his head again, to clear away dizziness. Suddenly his whole body was bathed in perspiration, and he was cold.

The cigarette tasted like something that shouldn't be mentioned. He crushed it on a smooth rock, rubbed the ashes with his fingers until all warmth was gone. He tried to move to a more comfortable position.

He knew he had quite a wait ahead of him. He could still hear the slow crashing which marked Jim's progress

through the blow-down. He had a momentary urge to call, to ask Jim to wait for him.

'I feel lousy,' he said aloud. He watched a camp robber flutter to a nearby branch. The bird eyed him curiously, moved closer, hopping and flying. Buck sat there and envied this means of locomotion.

He closed his eyes against the glare. He awakened with a start as his head snapped forward in a nod. The bird was gone.

'Dozing,' Buck said in disgust. 'Dozing like a dotard.' He repeated the phrase.

Something whizzed past, hissing spitefully. It smashed against a sloping boulder, bounded high into the air and crashed into brush.

'A rock,' Zebulion said.

He turned his head slowly towards the steep slope of broken rock rising above him, shook his head again to make his eyes focus. He was almost positive he saw a small figure on the trail above, a figure which disappeared at once.

He did not have time for speculation. The whole top of the slide was in motion. He forced his suddenly cramped and aching muscles into action. He moved in slow motion, floated and fell and slid, in slow motion. Down towards the shelter of a huge old tree trunk.

Above him the new, deep slide of rock, took on the roaring tone, a menacing rumble.

CHAPTER NINE

TIME and place were submerged in growing confusion. Buck remembered diving over the fallen tree, crawling into its shelter while rock and dust hit the trunk or bounded, hissing across the gully. He had a vague recollection of sun in his eyes, of the sting of lacerated knees and palms. He even heard Dunn calling, but it was not worth the effort to answer.

Then Jim's face was above him, peering down through a strangely coloured cloud. A worried face, lips moving in a series of questions, and then gentle hands examined his body.

Buck tried to smile, tried to get out some reassuring words. He heard the croak of his own voice as from a great distance. 'It's murder, Jim. Murder.'

Someone was with Jim, because he could hear a buzz of voices. That irritated him, just as it made him furious that the words he wanted to say always came out as, 'Murder! It's murder Jim.'

He struggled a little when they got him to his feet. He did not want to go anywhere, and they were pulling him along. His whole body ached, and he wanted to lie down in the sun which had lost its warmth.

Things were clawing at him, scratching his face. And it was funny because he was riding Jim piggy-back. There was a jolt and he was sprawled across a tree trunk. He looked down at Jim lying on the ground, and that was funny too, because Jim looked so surprised.

Then it was smoother and he was riding on a throne made of locked arms. Jim's arms and another man's. Buck turned his head to see who the other man was and he fell and fell.

He was in the jeep, somehow. Bouncing rapidly down the rough trail, then settling into smoother motion on the main highway. There was a wait at a roadside filling station under a blue and white telephone sign. A long, cold wait that was overpoweringly hot.

There was movement again. The grey camp robber was flying along smoothly now. It was nice of such a small bird. Small in comparison to his weight.

Then there was Sarah, and he had to reassure her. He should tell her everything was fine, that the camp robber had brought him home quickly, and he was tired of saying murder.

He was comfortable in the bed, even though some stranger was there poking a thermometer into his mouth, handing him a brightly coloured capsule to swallow. Then there was a glass of whitish liquid. It tasted like hand lotion, and his hands and knees were stinging again and it was cold and hot . . .

2

Doctor Haynes was past sixty, lean, white haired, and beginning to shrivel. His face was a rugged corrugation of deeply etched lines. He shook down the thermometer, put it away. 'A hundred and four. Not too bad.'

'But what is it, Doctor?' Sarah asked. 'He seemed to be all right this morning.'

'Has he been out where he'd pick up ticks?'

'Yes. But he said they didn't bother him.'

'One did,' Haynes said shortly. 'But you don't have to

worry. He'll be all right. He'll sleep quite a bit, and crab about having to take the capsules. Inside of three days he'll probably be on his feet again.'

Jim Dunn said, 'It was good of you to get here so fast. And I'm supposed to relay a message to you from Tom Cook. I understand you're the Coroner. There are two plane-crash victims, and the body of Old Joe, the prospector.' Jim told the doctor how to reach the proper place.

Haynes rubbed his chin and yawned. 'You said they were bodies?'

'Definitely bodies,' Jim said.

'They won't mind waiting then. I have other things to do.'

Sarah asked, 'Do we pay you now, Doctor?'

'I don't know. I hope so,' Haynes said. A twinkle in his eyes belied the gruffness of his voice. 'Let's see. A dollar a mile, that's forty-two dollars. A dollar apiece for the capsules. Oh well, call it an even fifty.'

'Can you wait until I get my purse open?' Sarah wanted to know.

'You're the one brought up the subject,' Haynes pointed out.

'I'm sorry,' Sarah said contritely. 'I guess I'm pretty upset. I didn't know what to think when Jim came carrying him in. He - he looked terrible.'

'He'll be all right,' Haynes repeated again. He stuffed the bills Sarah gave him into a side coat pocket from which a stethoscope protruded. 'If he gets a bad reaction from the capsules, let me know. Otherwise don't bother me.'

Jim walked out to the car with the doctor. 'I'll probably see you at the inquest,' Jim said.

'Why?' Haynes asked, getting in and sitting down heavily.

'My partner and I found the bodies.'

'Congratulations,' Haynes said. 'I've been finding bodies for years now.' He meshed gears with a clatter, spun his car wheels and drove away. He ministered to less than two thousand people, scattered over a mountain area larger than some eastern states.

Sarah Buck was waiting for reassurance. 'Did he say anything else, Jim? Did he say something you think you should keep from me?'

'No,' Jim said. 'I guess he put me in my place, whatever that is. Five Star General Nuisance, from the way he acted.'

'I hope he knows what he's doing.'

'Probably does,' Jim said. 'But if you have any doubts, we can always get your own doctor up from Denver. Even though I might have to hog-tie him to get him out of the city.'

'We'll see,' Sarah decided. 'Jim, what did Zebbie mean? Muttering about camp robbers and murder?'

Jim Dunn had not forgotten his own shock when he had returned to the gulley with Tom Cook, and had seen the new deep slide of rocks burying the place where he had left Buck. He had not forgotten his relief at the weak call which had brought their attention to the shelter Buck had found in time. And even in his nightmares he would never be able to dream up anything like the trip down.

'The camp robber is a greyish bird about so big,' Jim held out his hands. 'I don't think it's big enough to carry Zeb, even if he seemed to think so. In fact, Mrs. Buck, your husband has put on weight.'

'Please, Jim,' Sarah said, 'you don't have to cheer me up. Well – I guess you really do, but I want to know.'

'I do too,' Jim admitted. 'We did find the crashed

plane and occupants. We found the old prospector too. He'd fallen down a rock slide. Something happened while I was going back to the avalanche to get Tom Cook, who is also deputy sheriff. Zeb muttered about faces on the trail above him. I don't know, I guess we'll just have to wait until he tells us.'

Sarah said thoughtfully, 'Do you think the ranger, the abstemious Mr. Roane, knew what you were going to find? Is that the reason he pretended to sprain his ankle?'

'I meant to ask the doctor if he'd been called in to fix Roane up,' Jim admitted. 'But Haynes doesn't encourage light chit-chat. And I do think someone found the crashed plane months ago. There was a footprint. But – according to Zeb, our interest in the affair is at an end.'

'You don't really believe that, do you, Jim?'

Dunn tried to smile reassuringly. 'Don't see why not. Oh, I may have to testify at the inquest, but Cook feels pretty strongly the prospector's death was an accident. Unless an autopsy shows something pretty radical to the contrary, I'd make a bet that's the way it'll stand.'

'This prospector must have walked down the trail, past the wreck. And he'd been up there close by all winter. Wouldn't he have seen something?'

'Hard to tell,' Jim admitted. He regretted now the lost opportunity of searching the prospector's pockets. The missing money might have turned up there.

'Darn it!' Sarah flared. 'Don't pull that strong, silent act on me! And I want to know if someone tried to hurt Zebbie! Don't you think I want to know that?'

'You'll have your hands full taking care of him, without going out on a man hunt. And I'll promise to tell you anything I find out – when I find it out for sure.'

3

At ten-twenty Tuesday morning, Jim drove the Cadillac into Walters' filling station. Dan and his father moved in a well drilled team, the older man putting in the petrol, while the younger polished the windscreen, scraped away the splattered bugs.

Dan grinned through the glass at Jim. 'Heard your partner has the fever? Thought he acted funny yesterday on the slide. How is he this morning?'

'Better,' Jim said. 'After we left you, Cook, and the two ranchers working there, did any of you leave?'

'Don't think so,' Dan said. 'Oh, we had to go down to the horses once in a while for tools and stuff. Why?'

'You didn't leave?'

'Might have,' Dan said. 'Why?'

'My partner saw you on the trail above him just before a new rock slide came down.' Jim did not mind stretching the truth in order to gauge a reaction. And if Dan had been the one on the trail, the one Zebulon kept muttering about, there might even be a good explanation for his presence.

'Your partner,' Dan said, 'is nuts. What has he got it in for me for? But then, he's apt to see anything with the fever.'

'So that's your story?' Jim demanded. He saw Dan Walters was not listening. The younger man had turned to watch the green truck with 'U.S. Mail' speed down the hill, turn towards Mintern's Merc. Dan dropped the piece of orange-coloured paper he had been using on the windshield, absently stuck the spray bottle in a hip pocket, and hurried away towards the post office.

George Walters came around from behind, handed Jim the ring with the petrol-cap key, picked up the orange paper and began polishing where his son had left off.

'That boy's looking for some mail I guess. He's kept a look-out for the truck since nine-thirty.'

'Not expecting any reward this soon, is he?' Jim asked.

'He's a great one for expecting, Dan is,' the father chuckled. 'Only man around here I know who was better at expecting than Dan, was Old Joe. Never made much of anything out of that hole of his, but he about had Dan convinced he was going to make his fortune anytime.'

'Old Joe was – or Dan?'

'Maybe both,' George Walters said. 'Old Joe and Dan were pretty good friends. Wouldn't surprise me any if Dan inherited the claim. Old Joe didn't have any relatives. But of course it isn't worth anything. Might keep Dan around a while longer though.'

'He thinking of going away?'

Walters finished polishing the windshield. 'You know how it is. Grass always greener on the other side of the street. Young fellows are apt to get restless. I won't stand in his way, if he wants to go.'

'He's counting quite a bit on some reward money?'

'Always is some reward for finding missing planes,' George Walters said. 'That'll be three eighty-five, Mr. Dunn.'

Jim paid. 'Your son quite a mountaineer? I mean he goes climbing around a lot?'

'Likes to be alone once in a while. I can still wear him out on the trails though. Heard your partner's sick. Hope he gets all right.'

Dunn knew he was dismissed, nodded his thanks and drove from the station. In the rear-view mirror, he saw George Walters staring after him, even though a pick-up had driven in and wanted service.

The arrival of the mail truck had brought life to the sleeping Geneva, temporary life it is true, but a foretaste of what would occur every morning during the season when parking around the post office was actually a problem. Jim Dunn got out, held the screen door open for a rancher carrying cartons of chirping chickens, labelled 'Mile-hi Chicks.' Inside, the post office sounded more like a chicken hatchery than a post office and grocery store.

Jim walked around the shelves, filled a rubber tyred buggy with the things Sarah had asked him to buy. Bob Mintern was talking to a man in 'city' clothes, came over to the cash register. 'You in a hurry, Mr. Dunn?'

'No,' Jim said, 'finish up with your friend, if you want.'

Mintern grinned. 'He's no friend, he's a wholesaler. But if you're not in a hurry, I'll write him out a cheque.'

Jim nodded, turned away while Mintern took a black cheque-book from beneath the counter, began writing. Dunn did not turn away quickly, or very far. Not so far he did not see the date Bob wrote on the cheque. May twenty-sixth.

Mintern finished the writing, took the cheque to the waiting man. They shook hands, and the man left, folding the piece of paper. Jim made a note of the sign on the side of the station wagon the man drove away.

'Now then, Mr. Dunn,' Mintern said. 'Sorry to keep you waiting. Hear your friend Mr. Buck has a touch of fever?'

'That's right. He's getting along all right though.'

Mintern totalled the purchases, took Jim's bill and made change. Not very much change from the ten, though the groceries went into a single bag with room to spare. 'Glad to hear it,' Mintern said rather vaguely. 'Come in again, Mr. Dunn.'

Jim did not point out he would have to come in again

if he wanted mail, or groceries, took the bag out to the car and put it in the back seat. He came back to the post office side, took a place in the waiting line before the single window. A line which consisted of two people in front of him.

Mrs. Mintern smiled at him when he reached the window, handed him over a plump envelope. Jim said, 'Thanks.' The envelope was addressed to him, and he knew it would contain very important papers Miss Wister, in the Pine Detective Agency office, wanted him to sign. Chiefly Miss Wister's pay cheque. He said, 'Anything for Mr. or Mrs. Buck?'

Lucy Mintern's smile congealed around the edges. 'Not a thing for them,' she said.

Jim suppressed a grin, turned away. He had an idea mail service for the Bucks was going to be as poor as the notoriously bad Denver delivery service.

Dan Walters pushed past, carrying a handful of letters and circulars. Jim noticed a single letter had been segregated, stuck out of the hip pocket which still held the windshield-spray bottle. Dan sent a glare in his direction, and Dunn thought it was for him until he heard Harlan Purdy muttering at his shoulder.

'Durn squirt,' Old Purdy said. 'Hey you, Dunn! Hear your partner's got the fever? Thought he promised there wouldn't be any unfavourable publicity?'

'He didn't get it on purpose, Mr. Purdy,' Jim said.

'Maybe not. Maybe not. Doesn't do us any good though to have things like that get out this near fishing season. Gives a place a bad name. Just shows you what comes of messing around where you got no business.'

'You have any particular place in mind?' Jim asked.

'No,' Purdy said. 'No. I – it's just the principle of the thing.' He stalked away before Jim could say anything else.

Dunn walked from '*the Merc.*' as everyone called it, had the car door open when someone called.

'Yoohoo! Oh, Mr. Dunn.'

He turned, waited for Celeste Cook to come over.

'Oh, Mr. Dunn! Can I cadge a ride with you? Back to the Lodge? Tom took the station wagon, and it's the the only car I'll drive. You won't mind, will you? I mean if you're going that way?'

Dunn held the door for her, said 'Sure thing, Mrs. Cook.' He knew the woman would have expected a ride if he had been in a hurry to go the opposite direction. He played along, 'Glad to take you anywhere you have in mind.'

She smiled at him, but as Jim walked around to get in the driver's side he thought the smile forced. As if it came from habit, while the mind which should have directed it was busy with other matters.

CHAPTER TEN

'WOULD you mind driving slowly?' Celeste Cook asked. 'I'm going to put my cards on the table.'

Jim dutifully took his foot off the throttle, let the Cadillac coast along.

It had been his experience that people who intended hiding something usually prefaced their remarks with, 'I'm going to tell you the whole thing,' or, 'I'll put my cards on the table.'

'This car – it worries me. You must be making money. Maybe you'll come high. But here!' She had opened her purse and she put a small roll of bills on the seat between them. The roll was arranged so Jim could see the top bill at least was a hundred dollars.

'What's that for?' Jim asked.

'I know about you. I remember reading in the papers about you. About that business up in Peak City last summer. I know you're a private detective. This money is for information.'

'Such as what?' Jim let the car coast to a stop, turned for a better look at his passenger. He was in time to catch the scornful twist of her lips, a scorn which was quickly erased, and replaced with a set smile.

'Don't play hard to get. That's all I'm willing to pay.'

'It might help a little if you told me why you want to pay me anything?'

'Don't be too cautious! I know there's more in that roll than he could pay you. I know Tom Cook, and I

could tell you to the last nickel just how much cash he has.'

Jim tried to feel his way along. 'There is the matter of business ethics.'

'Ethics! That's a laugh.'

'All right,' Jim said amiably. 'We'll have a good laugh. But it costs money to run Cadillacs. Suppose I told you I didn't have a client up here?'

'Oh, all right.' She opened her purse again, put another bill down on the seat. 'That's all. That's absolutely all it's worth to me.'

Jim thought it over, decided to try the most obvious. 'Your husband looking for divorce evidence?'

She laughed, and there was little pleasure in the sound. 'You might have been told that. It's the sort of thing Tom would say.'

'But it isn't true?'

'About a divorce? Of course not. The last thing Tom would want is a divorce now. He wants evidence all right! But he wants to use it as a hold over me. A threat, so he can dictate. But you figured that out, didn't you?'

'Frankly, no,' Jim said. He had lost his taste for digging into the matter. He wanted no part of a personal problem between a husband and wife. He started the car again. 'Put your money away, Mrs. Cook. You've made a mistake.'

She put the money away. She put her hand on his arm. 'Mr. Dunn – Jim – perhaps I have underestimated you. Perhaps I shouldn't have offered you money.' She leaned closer, leaned her body against his hand which rested on the lower part of the steering wheel. 'But I want this information very much. I have to know. I have to know how much Tom has found out, and how much he just

suspects. I – but let's go to my place, have a drink, and talk it over.'

Dunn took his eyes off the road, slowed again to a crawl. He had no doubt as to Celeste's meaning or that she was serious. 'You make me sorry I can't tell you what you want to know. I can't tell you, because your husband is not a client of mine. He has not hired me, or my partner for that matter, for any purpose whatsoever. We're here on a job, yes. But it's a job for the government. And if Buck hadn't come down with fever, we'd be on our way by now.'

For a moment her grip tightened, while her eyes searched his face. She drew in a deep breath. 'Shows what a guilty conscience will do.'

'You have a guilty conscience?'

'I probably should have. No, I guess I said it wrong. I don't want to be found out, but I don't feel guilty. You've no idea what a girl will think up to amuse herself up here in the winter. And what else is there to do?'

'You could ski,' Jim suggested.

She laughed. 'Or take cold showers, I suppose? I'll leave that sort of thing to Tom. And I have an idea if my plans work out, Tom'll be a good little dog. Well, Celeste certainly pulled a boner this time.'

'Celeste did,' Jim agreed.

'I wonder,' she went on thoughtfully, 'if you know what it's like up here in the winter for a girl like me? Nothing much to do, cold as all getout, snow, wind and storms. I hate the wind. It's so cruel and frightening. And the snow makes it so hard to get around. Especially when slides close the road as they did last winter. I – but you don't want to hear my troubles.'

Jim said what was expected, 'Oh, I don't know. Naturally I'm interested, and have my share of curiosity.

I gather you and your husband don't get along. And you don't like this part of the country. Why stick around? Is there a law?'

'You're pretty close. Maybe you've heard of that stuff called money?'

'I've heard,' Jim said. 'I have a distant acquaintance.'

'Leave it at that, then. I may be a blonde, but I know my way around – in some things. Say, you know you're nice? I think I'll let that invitation for a drink stand.'

Dunn turned in through the rock arch entrance to the grounds of Alpine Lodge. There were signs of increasing activity. A truck was backed up to the rear entrance to the main lodge, and workmen were scurrying about.

'They're heating the pool,' Celeste said. 'And that reminds me. I'm wondering now how long it will be before Mr. Buck can be moved. You know when I rented the double chalet to you I said I would have to have it when the season opened.'

'I don't know about that,' Jim said. 'We'll see how he improves.'

'I could of course still give you single rooms in the main lodge,' Celeste went on with her own thoughts. 'That might do it. And it'd take care of my reservation on a double.'

'Quite some sound effects,' Jim said.

She looked at him and laughed. 'I do have to be careful who I put in the doubles. Usually rent them to one family, so the thin walls won't matter. There's only one other duplex that is like that though. Next year – well, never mind. You turn up here to our cottage. You coming in for that drink?'

Jim stopped the Cadillac alongside a station wagon. 'Looks as if your husband was back.'

'Some other time might be better then,' Celeste said.

'I want to see Mr. Cook.'

'All right. Come to think of it, that might be smart. I don't want Tom to get suspicious of you. Not right now.' She raised her voice, 'Tom! Oh Tom! Man to see you.'

Front curtains in the cottage fell back into place, and Tom Cook came through the front door, down the flagstone terrace. He was scowling, but when he looked from his wife, to Jim and back again, he relaxed.

'Won't take long,' Jim said. 'Just wanted to tell you I'd be available for the inquest on the old prospector when I'm needed.'

Cook said, 'We had the inquest this morning. Accidental death, of course.' He smiled smugly. 'You see, we expedite matters here. And I always do my best to make certain our guests will not be troubled by local affairs. I know you and your partner found the body, but since I was practically on the scene I was glad to do this for you.'

'Thanks,' Jim said drily. 'Wonder if you'd tell me something. Did Dr. Haynes examine the bodies of the two crash victims?'

'He did. They were both killed instantly at the time of the crash. The old prospector was rock crushed.'

'Much obliged,' Jim said. He got back in the car and drove towards the Bucks' chalet. He frowned for a while, then chuckled. 'Looks like I took my harp to the party, and nobody wants me to play.'

2

Jim carried the groceries up the chalet steps, crossed the narrow balcony to the Bucks' door. Sarah let him in and she appeared worried.

'I'm glad you came back, Jim,' she said. 'Zebbie woke up a while ago. He knows what's going on now, but he's restless. There's something he wants you to do. I think he's gone back to sleep again.'

'Not asleep,' Buck's voice was only a shadow.

Jim went into the bedroom. 'Hi, you lazy bum. What a way to get out of having to walk back to the jeep! What's on your mind?'

'Mail – the two sets of prints to Washington.'

'Okay,' Jim said. 'Any particular place in Washington? Or would the address be too hush-hush?'

Buck's lips twitched in a faint smile. 'Brief-case,' he said.

Jim brought the case, opened it, held up one paper after another until he came to the stamped and addressed manila evelope.

'That's it. The prints will just go inside. Mail it, Jim.'

'Consider it done. How you feeling?'

'That – is a hell of a question,' Buck said. He closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep.

Jim found Sarah looking a question she did not put into words. 'He'll be all right. Don't worry about him. I guess Dr. Haynes knows what he's doing, all right. His fever's gone down. Has he done any more talking about murder?'

'No. He's so weak, Jim.'

'No wonder. But another couple days and he'll be on his feet. And by the way, if he wakes up and asks, the inquest called the prospector's death an accident.'

Sarah nodded. 'What are you going to do, Jim? I understand you're through here. Are you going to stay around, or do you have to get back to the office?'

'Nothing there right now,' Jim said blithely. 'I might as well stick around until Buck's strong enough to take a

little kidding. Z. Buck, the man the ticks didn't bother. For that matter, I might do a little fishing, when the season opens. Meantime, I'm going to do some noseying around.'

3

Jim Dunn waited in the booth until his steak sandwich had been on the serving counter for a good five minutes. He got up slowly, walked over towards the girl behind the dark wood barrier. From the closed-off kitchen the rattle and clang of pots and pans told of Harlan Purdy's activities.

'Do you mind if I take this?' Jim asked, picking up the heavy plate.

Amy looked at him a moment with large, blank eyes. She did not change her position, leaned on her elbows, her face cupped by her palms. 'Mind? Mind?' Comprehension returned and with it a flood of colour to her face. 'Oh – I'm sorry! I'm afraid it'll be cold now.'

'I like it that way,' Jim grinned. 'Nothing like a cold piece of meat and iced potatoes, I always say.'

She answered his smile uncertainly.

'You were a good many miles away,' Dunn said. 'Or do you just have some big problem?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I -- but that's no excuse. I'll send this back to Pop and have him warm it up.'

Jim started what he intended as a half-hearted protest. The phone in the little booth sounded, and he watched the girl's lips move as she counted the rings.

'Ours,' she said, started quickly around the counter.

Her father popped from the kitchen, beat her to the instrument. 'I'll take that! And if it's that young squirt, I'll give him a piece of my mind.'

Jim carried his plate to the booth which just happened to be quite a bit nearer the phone.

'Hello?' Purdy shouted. 'Speak louder. I can't hear you . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . She's right here. I'll call her.' He turned towards the girl who had been holding her breath. 'Wasn't Dan,' Harlan Purdy said. 'It's that Priscilla, that cousin of yours in Denver.'

Jim was puzzled by the expression on Amy's face as she picked up the receiver. He thought she approached the instrument in much the same way a frightened bird would hop closer to a snake. He made motions of cutting his cold meat as he listened.

'Yes. Yes, this is Amy. . . . You did? I see . . . When? Tomorrow night? I – I – wait a minute and I'll ask Pop.' Her face was very pale, and she put the question to her father in a rush of words. 'Priscilla wants me to come down tomorrow, and spend the night. I can come back on the Thursday bus. Is that all right?'

Purdy was on his way back to the kitchen. 'I guess so. You haven't had much time off lately. Be sure you come back Thursday though. The early fishermen will start coming through in the afternoon, and you know what a madhouse we'll have Friday. Sure – go ahead.' The swinging doors to the kitchen fanned shut behind him. The clatter of pots and pans was renewed. Old Purdy sang in an off key voice, 'I'm a little prairie flower, growing wilder every hour — '

Amy stood for a long minute, hands gripping the receiver until the knuckles showed white. She opened and closed her mouth several times. The telephone squawked angrily. 'Hello, Priscilla. I know – I know it's long distance. But Dad won't — ' She bit her lips, shook her head as if to rid herself of a buzzing insect. 'Yes. I'll try to talk louder. A poor connection I guess. It – it's all set then.

Yes – I'll do the same for you some time. I'll be seeing you. Bye, now.'

Amy turned away from the phone. Her face showed strain, and yet with that expression was one of relief, as if events had moved quickly, would now run their course without necessity of any action on her part.

Jim managed to swallow the first bit of meat he had cut off, started sawing on another. It seemed to him to be a lot of to-do about spending the night with a girl cousin in Denver. Too much ado, he decided.

Amy went behind the counter, directly to the side window. She pulled down the yellowed shade, left it down although there was no sunlight coming from that side at this time of day. She returned to her sleepwalker stance, and was jolted from it only when the door opened and Roger Estes came inside.

Jim was happy for the interruption. He gave up the struggle with his meat and devoted himself to open listening.

'Hello, Amy,' Roger said. 'I – I've wanted to see you since the party.'

She smiled. 'Have you, Rog? Why didn't you?'

'I don't know. I guess I thought you might not want to see me. I'm sorry about what happened there.'

'So am I,' Amy said seriously. 'I – well I am sorry. We were having a good time, weren't we?' She made no attempt to keep wistfulness from her voice.

Estes was encouraged. 'Don't put it so much in the past tense, Amy. We'll have other good times. Plenty of them. That's what I came by about now.'

Purdy poked his head through the swinging doors, said, 'Glad to see you, Estes. You all ready for the big crowd, opening day?' He barely waited for an answer before going back to his kitchen.

'Pretty heavy-handed paternal approval,' Jim decided silently.

'But Rog, I don't think I can — '

'At least wait until you hear what I have in mind before you turn me down,' Estes smiled. 'I have tickets for a show in Denver for tomorrow night. I thought you might like to go. Guess we'll both be pretty busy for a while after that.'

The girl put one hand to her throat. 'I – gosh I'm sorry Rog. I – well, I've made plans for tomorrow night. Just about ten minutes ago.'

'Being a trifle late seems to be a bad habit of mine,' Estes said slowly. 'Which I'll try to remedy in the future. How about your setting the time for another night, Amy? I'll take time off whenever you say.'

'I don't know! I don't know!' Amy's words were half plea, half wail. 'You won't – Oh!' She raced around the counter out through the back of the dining-room to the Purdy living quarters.

Roger turned around, listened with Jim to the sound of a slammed door. Dunn pretended a great interest in the mess on his plate. He did not want to let Estes know he had been a witness to the naked agony in the younger man's eyes.

Purdy popped from the kitchen, an obvious vantage point to overhear everything that went on. 'Don't you pay her tantrums any heed, Roger. We've been working pretty hard getting ready for the season. She'll feel better after she has some time off with her cousin in Denver.'

'That's where she's going tomorrow?' Estes said thoughtfully.

'Sure. You know how women are. Like to have a gab feast once in a while. Does her good. Amy misses having a woman to talk to once in a while.'

'Yes,' Estes said. 'I see. I guess I see.'

Jim got up from the booth, and Roger Estes appeared surprised to see him.

Harlan Purdy said, 'I don't guess she remembered to give you a check. That'll be one twenty-seven. With tax.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OLD ANDRUS uncapped a bottle of beer, filled Jim's glass, then hurried away to bring dinner.

'Three bucks for a steak,' Andrus said. 'That's really something. And they got it figured out so we don't make much more on it than we used to on a dime hamburger.'

'You been in this business long?' Dunn asked.

'Too long,' Andrus said. He poured himself a liberal drink from a behind-the-bar-bottle, sipped it slowly and with relish until it was gone. 'But then, one day could be too long. I hear you're a private eye?'

'That's about the first time I've actually heard that expression used,' Jim said. 'Word gets around this town, doesn't it? You must know Mrs. Cook pretty well.'

'I've met her,' Andrus said. 'Well, it won't be long now before you won't get such good service. Thursday night and from then on, we'll be swamped.'

The abrupt change in the line of talk convinced Jim there was more than a casual meeting between Andrus and Celeste Cook. Jim watched the bartender pour himself another liberal drink. He realised with some suprise that Andrus had been drinking heavily. It showed only in a slight hesitancy of his speech, in the deliberateness of his movements. 'You celebrating something?' Jim asked. If Andrus wanted conversation, Jim wanted him to do the talking. He was hungry, and the dinner was excellent.

'Celebrating?' Andrus considered the question. 'I

guess you might call it that. Anyhow it's my turn to go to fire meeting tonight. We both can't go at the same time, so we take turns. That way one of us is always here to keep the joint open.'

Dunn swallowed, said, 'Fire meeting?'

'Sure. We have a local volunteer group. You wouldn't believe it maybe, but fire is something everyone around here gets together on. We have a Chevrolet truck with a tank, and a good pump now. If there's water around anywhere we can do a good job. If we get there before everything's burnt up.'

Jim nodded at that necessary requisite. 'How about winter?'

Andrus shivered at the thought of past cold, had to refresh himself with another slug from the bottle. 'That's really something! Like as not, we forget to doctor the water in the truck's tank, and she's frozen solid by the time we get to the fire. Then the creek'll be frozen, and the well goes dry. So about all we can do in a winter fire is back up to the blaze and keep warm. I don't like going to fire meetings.'

Jim pursued his last bit of meat, ate it with the last french fried potato he had saved. 'How come?'

'I just don't like fire, I guess,' Andrus was confidential. 'Now some people, they like fires. I don't like them. But I heard some people get a kick out of them. You know, a kick.'

'Pyromaniacs?'

'If you say so,' Red agreed. 'They like them anyway. I don't. Fires upset me. You can't argue with a fire. And anyway when we get a fire, it's always in the most god-forsaken spot. Hard to get to. If I have to travel, I like a little pavement under my feet.'

'Don't you like ski-ing or snow-shoeing?'

'Are you kidding?' Andrus asked. 'Only smart thing in these mountains are the bears. They sleep all winter. Or so I thought. Now the ranger tells me they don't really sleep all winter.' Red sounded as if someone had destroyed his fondest illusion. 'You think he'd lie to a man about something like that?'

'I don't know him too well,' Jim said.

'Lucky you. He's a teetotaler. And going around telling a man things like that. It doesn't seem right, and him a ranger. I don't know. Looks like you can't even trust bears any more.'

Roger Estes came out of the kitchen, put on a cleaner apron and went behind the bar. 'How was your dinner, Mr. Dunn?'

'Excellent,' Jim said with real enthusiasm.

Andrus said, 'Rog, I've decided not to go to fire meeting.'

'Oh?'

Andrus poured himself another liberal drink. Estes watched him, did not say anything until the drink was gone.

'It's your turn to go,' Roger said then. 'Do you good to get a little air, Red.' He took the bar rag from Andrus's hands in much the same manner a baseball team manager relieves an ineffectual pitcher of the ball. 'And it's time you were on your way.'

'Not going,' Red said sulkily.

Estes reached up one hand, started to take off his new glasses.

Red Andrus came from behind the bar in a rush, stripped off his apron as he came. 'All right. All right. I'll go.' He grabbed Jim by the arm. 'Say, you doing anything? Why don't you come along with me.'

'Visitors permitted?'

'Sure. Sure. You come along.'

Dunn thought Estes was going to voice some objection, so he said quickly, as he paid his tab, 'Thanks. I'll do that!' He followed Andrus out into the growing dark, nodded to Estes', 'Thanks and come again.'

Andrus waited until the door was closed, then said, 'Brrrr!'

'Want to get a coat?' Jim asked.

'It's not the cold,' Andrus said. 'You ever heard of a whammy?'

'Whammy? Sort of a hopped-up evil eye isn't it?'

'That's pretty good,' Red said. 'A hopped-up evil eye. That's pretty good. You see Rog start to take off his glasses? He was going to put the whammy on me. It's not fair! That's what I say. Now, Rog's as nice a guy as you'd ever want to know, even if he does have funny ideas. But it ain't right for him to put the whammy on me, is it?'

2

Once again Jim Dunn was a visitor in the assembly room of the school-house. He and Andrus were just in time. Red mumbled unintelligible introductions, and the meeting was called to order. Jim already knew old Purdy, George Walters and Tom Cook. The ranger, Fred Roane, hurried in late, began limping when he saw Jim, and was fined a quarter for tardiness.

'I've been here before,' Roane complained. 'Setting up the projector for a fire picture reel I have.'

'Weren't here at roll call,' Purdy said. Apparently he was treasurer because he took the fine, put it in a cigar box. Bob Mintern came in much later, paid his fine without question. The town was well represented, but even

so, the large majority of the members were strangers to Jim.

Jeans, jackets and boots were so common as to be almost a uniform. But in the boots themselves, there was a great divergence. They ran the gamut from fancy hand-stitched cowboy boots, to patched rubber knee-length boots still bringing evidence with them of the evening chores.

Fred Roane said, 'You all know conditions around here. You know we haven't had the usual heavy spring snow. We'll probably get it yet, but the new five-day forecasts are out, and no precipitation promised. A hot sun, low humidity, and we'll have bad conditions for the opening of fishing season. You know what that'll mean. From Thursday on, I'll be at my phone all the time. Call in if you see a smoke, even though I'll probably get a position on it from Devil's Head first. We'll use the usual number of rings for an emergency. The telephone company is ready to co-operate. Those of you who don't have phones, will be picked up as the need arises. Now then, I'll show you all on this map where there are already caches of tools and equipment.'

Dunn was rather surprised at the calm way in which the men accepted this preparation for mobilisation. It was, he realised, an old story for them, an unpleasant but necessary part of their lives.

Jim learned that June was apt to be a bad month for fires. He learned that the daily changes in wind were vitally important, had been calculated and charted. He learned of the fear of those in the tourist trade, of an emergency closing of the whole area to campers, hunters and fishermen if the fire danger became too acute. He learned the ranchers had quite a different attitude towards tourists than the townspeople.

Tourists, to the ranchers, were just one more cross to

bear. Along with beetle infestation, dry seasons, rain in haying time, and rollbacks on beef. Knowing something of ranchers, Jim realised few of them were above starting a fire themselves when they needed a little more pasture. Their attitude towards the ranger was one of momentary truce, because all ranchers knew that Government Forest Rangers were created solely to harass cattlemen and cut down their profits. Yet in fires on Government land, Fred Roane was their boss, accepted as such, and even kidded a little about a fire the preceding fall when deductions had been made from their fire-fighting cheques for lunches which had not arrived.

On state land a fire was a Sheriff's fire, and Tom Cook as deputy came in for some comment on the meagreness of pay by the county.

Yet Jim realised there was a united front against fire, that the men would have fought fire without any pay. In evidence of that he noticed the members signing over their cheques from the last fire to the department for running expenses.

The meeting ended with Roane showing a colour movie, with sound, of a Government film on fire fighting. The men watched in silence, as the pictured ranger spotted the smoke, left hurriedly in his already loaded pick-up, then packed in over rough trail to the fire. He circled the blaze before starting fighting operations, spread out his pack in a designated way which would show a plane flying overhead that he needed no help.

'That's his first mistake.' The comment came from the darkened room and the men chuckled.

The pictured fire was cresting through small growth, and he attacked it there. He pushed a shovel deep into black earth, flung the dirt high, knocking fire from the burning branches.

That brought down the house. Every time the pictured ranger would bury the blade of his shovel in earth, they whooped with merriment. Jim Dunn did not see any reason for such laughter. Not then.

3

Tom Cook said, 'I want to talk to you a few minutes, if you have the time?'

'Sure,' Jim said. He waved to Andrus who hurried down the street towards the bar.

Cook led the way to his station wagon, and they sat together in the front seat. 'I don't want you to get any wrong ideas,' Cook began.

'I'll try not to. What did you have in mind?'

'I got to thinking about the inquest. I don't want you to think I was high-handed in carrying on without you.'

'If you're satisfied, I'm happy,' Jim said.

'I try to keep things simple,' Cook said defensively. 'Cut out the red tape and get to the facts of each case.'

'Good idea,' Jim applauded.

Tom looked at him suspiciously. 'Well, I just wanted you to know,' he said lamely.

'Thanks,' Jim said. He wondered if Cook was trying to work around to talk about Celeste.

Apparently the deputy was just being official this evening, with county, not private matters on his mind. 'You seen young Dan Walters?'

'This morning,' Jim said. 'Why?'

'I can't find him. George Walters locked up the station so he could come to fire meeting. I want to ask Dan a few questions.'

'Such as?'

Cook thought about it. 'I guess it can't make any difference. It'll be in the papers tomorrow. And through – ah – official channels I have learned one of the men on that plane was carrying a large sum of money. In cash.'

'And?'

'There wasn't any on the bodies. Not a large sum that is. Not when I got there.'

'No money on the prospector either?' Jim asked.

'Money on Old Joe? He didn't have a dime in his jeans.'

Dunn nodded. 'Of course,' he said, 'you could be asking me if either my partner or I lifted the dead man's money. In a fairly polite way.'

Tom Cook went on determinedly. 'I'm not sure of my ground. I don't know where you and your partner fit into this picture. But word has been passed down from higher up to leave you alone.'

'Thanks,' Jim said.

Cook fumbled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one without making a gesture of offering one to Jim. 'Dan Walters is a local boy. He had a tough time in the last war, was actually in Korea then. World War Two, I mean. He hasn't been very happy since he came back. Restless. Roving around. Finding it hard to stick to anything. People around here sympathize though, and they've put up with a good deal from Dan. I don't want to stir up anything unless I have to. I thought – well, I thought there might be some good reason why you and your partner took the money from the crash victim.'

Jim said slowly, 'All we took from him was his fingerprints.'

'So that's what you came here for?'

'I can't stop you from guessing,' Jim said firmly, 'but I've answered all the questions I'm going to.'

Cook nodded, then sighed. 'This is going to stir things up, right when we'll all be plenty busy with the opening of the season. But I have my duty. I guess I'll have to give young Walters a pretty thorough going over.'

'After you find him,' Jim reminded. 'But why don't you just take him up to the county seat, and let the Sheriff do the dirty work?'

'I'm not a man who shirks duty just because it is unpleasant,' Cook said pompously.

Jim felt such a performance should be applauded, barely stopped himself from clapping. He said, 'What about this hermit? Kermit.'

'What about him?'

'That's what I asked,' Jim pointed out.

Cook settled back in the seat, and Jim could almost hear ruffled feathers settling back into place. 'He came here a few years ago, bought a little piece of ground and put up his shack. He told it around he wanted to be alone. Nobody bothered him much, outside of neighbourly calls for a while. Then one spring he came in with that beard of his, started working the tourists. They give him a quarter or a dollar to take his picture. Kermit really puts on quite a do, and the tourists love it. I guess Kermit cleans up quite a bit in the summer, and then of course we give him a monthly cheque.'

'That all he lives on?'

'I don't know. He used to get quite a bit of mail from the east. Big envelopes. Harlan Purdy told me about that. You know Purdy used to have the post office?'

'And now the Minterns have it. How does Purdy feel about that?'

'I think you could guess,' Cook chuckled. 'I guess old Purdy is about as wealthy as anybody around here. But he doesn't think any more of a quarter than he does of

his right arm. But as for Kermit the Hermit, he's crazy as a loon, of course.'

'Why?'

'Good heavens, man! Does he lead a normal life? Does any man who is in his right mind go off and live by himself that way?'

'Could be argued,' Jim said. 'But is Kermit ever violent? What form does his craziness take?'

'He's harmless, I guess. But why ask me about him? Why not pay him a call?'

Jim thought there was more than a trace of maliciousness in the suggestion, but he said, 'Good idea. I may do that tomorrow. How do I get there?'

'Closest way is by trail. Just beyond our place where Beaver Brook comes down into Silver Creek. You can drive that far, then take the trail up Beaver Brook. It's not very far. You just follow along the trail and you can't miss.' Tom Cook laughed. 'No sir! You can't miss.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

THAT Wednesday morning, the thermometer was only a few degrees above freezing when Jim left Alpine Lodge. By the time he left the car on the edge of an old county road, and started his trek up the Beaver Brook trail, he was positive the temperature had risen at least thirty degrees. The sun burned down through the thin air, and there was no puff of cloud in the unbelievable blue of the sky. It might have been the recent fire meeting, but Jim was very conscious now of the dryness of the pine needles underfoot, of the way the grass broke off when he stepped on it, grass which was losing its green bloom of spring in the burning sun. His lips began to crack before he had gone more than an eighth of a mile up the trail.

He stopped for a breather, moved forward more cautiously. He was not sure what he would get into, but Tom Cook's attitude had given him a warning. He stopped suddenly.

The black silk fish line was stretched across the trail, ankle high. Jim had a foot lifted to step over it, when he hesitated, returned the foot to the ground it had just left. He stood in the trail for a long time, examining the ground beyond the line carefully. He could see nothing. He raised his field of visual examination, found a second and shoulder-high, strand across the path. This one was gossamer nylon leader material, resembled a spider's web in appearance but not in strength. Still closer examination

of the ground on either side of the trail revealed cunningly hidden snares which connected with a distant pile of tin cans.

'I guess the hermit really wants privacy,' Jim told himself. 'Either that – or a few minutes' warning.'

He accepted the problem as a challenge, moved slowly and cautiously in avoiding all the warning traps, using every bit of his considerable amount of trail lore. Twice on the rest of the way to the cabin, he was nearly caught. Each time he had found no booby traps for so long a time, he had come to believe he was past the barriers. He came out of heavy timber at last, to the edge of the small clearing which centred around a swiftly flowing spring and the hermit's cabin.

A surprising cabin. Jim had had in mind something in the nature of a sod dug-out, or a tin and tar-paper shack. At best a log cabin resembling that of the old prospector.

Kermit's place was small, but it was built of manufactured log siding which gleamed under its coats of varnish. From a small outbuilding came the chug-chug of a light plant, and on the stone-flagged back patio, a man was putting clothes into a white porcelained washing machine. The whole clearing was floored with gravel, and each pebble looked as if it had been carefully washed, and polished. A large wood pile, stacked in geometric precision, and with each piece of wood exactly the same length, made a partial barrier for the patio. But no piece of wood had been permitted to shed any bark on gravel, no pine tree could leave its needles and cones there.

The man at the washing-machine looked up, saw Jim, and moved quickly. Kermit snatched up the false black beard which was attached to the droopy cap. He started to put it on, hesitated.

'You walk softly, my friend.' There was no trace of the Kermit intonations he had used at the Civic Meeting.

Jim held out his empty hands. 'But I carry no big stick.'

The hermit smiled. 'Apt,' he said. He hung the cap and beard back up, turned off the washing-machine. A little dusting of soap powder had fallen on the stones. Kermit took a clean rag from his pocket, brushed the powder into a tiny pile. He scooped it into a dustpan, carried it over to a buried garbage disposal unit.

'As you see,' Kermit said, 'you caught me with my beard down. I'll be upset about this for weeks. But it's done. Perhaps I was becoming over-confident, relying too much on my warning signals. But so few people bother me any more.'

'Don't let me keep you from your washing,' Jim said politely.

Kermit looked at his expensive wristwatch. 'I'm a few minutes ahead of schedule this morning, so I can spare you some time. Is this visit official?'

'Official? I don't understand. What official standing do I have around here?'

'I'd like to know,' Kermit said. 'I really do have a great amount of curiosity, and I find that quality unrestful. Otherwise, I have worked out a simple little schedule for everyday life. But curiosity – ' he shook his head sadly – 'curiosity is so prone to get one in trouble.'

Dunn disregarded the warning, if it was one. 'This schedule of yours, do you mind telling me something about it?'

'Not at all. Possibly you'll think I do have my little mannerisms, but one can't help that, can one? The schedule. Yes. It makes things so simple. A time for meals, for cleaning up the yard. And, for example, I play the flute

Wednesday and Saturday evenings from eight until nine-thirty. Similar times are set aside for reading, and I allow a certain number of hours each week for non-productive activities, such as exercise. Purposeless hikes, I mean. I maintain —'

Jim had believed he had the hermit well launched into a pet subject, but now the small man stopped abruptly, glared at him, waited silently. It took Jim a few seconds to realise the trouble. He had pulled out a cigarette automatically, and lit it. He still held the match in his hand. He made certain it was out, put it back in his jacket pocket. Kermit relaxed a little, but Dunn now faced the problem of disposing of the ashes. He solved that by walking over to the garbage pit, raising the heavy iron lid and letting the grey ash sift down. He decided it was a lot of work, and soon discarded the whole cigarette in the same manner.

Kermit actually smiled. 'I do like neatness. It may be I carry matters to an extreme. I know my wife used to tell me as much.'

'You're married?'

'You might say yes and no. My wife really led me a Harvey until we decided to live apart.'

'A Harvey?'

'Certainly. She led me a Mary Chase. Pretty good, isn't it? I thought of that last – yes – last December twenty-third during my weekly hour of meditation.'

Jim thought the time might have been employed to better advantage. 'Do you take your non-productive walks even in winter?'

'Certainly. One cannot give in to the seasons up here. I roam the hills a good deal. I am a great believer in fresh air. Outside the house. That was one thing on which my wife and I disagreed. I might say she was a fresh air

fiend. I have never known anyone who could get a larger opening from a single window. And during winters, she was never so happy as when there was a blizzard in the bedroom.'

Kermit looked at Jim expectantly, then went on with his dialogue when Dunn managed to restrain his enthusiasm.

'Personally I do not find it zestful to be awakened on a twenty below morning to the merry sound of breaking beer bottles, frozen hard in a case forgotten beneath the bed. The bedside waterglass is frozen, held together in shreds by chunks of ice. No use looking for your slippers in the six-inch snowdrift on the floor. And at any rate it is cold enough so your bare feet won't melt the snow after the first few steps.

'I'll tell you there were mornings when I was blue and purple by the time I had a cheery fire going in the heater. I'd begin to thaw out. I could actually move one or two of my toes. Then I would hear a rustle from the bedroom, and I would wait. I knew it would come, but I would wait. My wife would make her appearance. "Isn't it stuffy in here?" she'd say. "Isn't that too hot a fire? Aren't you afraid you'll burn the house down?" Then it would inevitably follow, that horrid sound of opening windows.' Kermit looked sideways at Jim. 'Perhaps you remember a few years back when the scientists said our winters were getting warmer? Of course they were! I was keeping warm the whole outdoors!'

Dunn felt called upon for a criticism of the performance. 'Very nice,' he said. 'You're practising?'

Kermit bowed mockingly. 'You're rather shrewd at that. Tell me, are you finding out anything about the murder?'

'The old prospector,' Kermit said. 'Oh, I know it was

officially called accident, but I understand your partner was crying murder.'

'He had a high fever,' Jim said. 'Do you think Old Joe was killed?'

'But certainly. Otherwise his kind go on and on forever. And it's rather silly to say he fell over the slide. He'd been using that trail for several decades. He knew the danger points.'

'He could have been careless.'

'So he could. But he wouldn't have been careless there. No. If he'd fallen a few feet somewhere else, I might go along with the accident theory. Old Joe wouldn't have been careless in that spot! He knew the mountains. He knew you only make one mistake such as that.'

Jim Dunn had worked things out in his own mind along very similar lines. 'You know of any reason anyone would want his death?'

'No,' Kermit said. 'That rather bothers me. I think I will devote my next hour of meditation to the problem.'

'Might let me know if anything comes of it,' Jim said. 'Do you mind telling me why you take such elaborate precautions to know when someone is coming.'

'My beard is one reason,' Kermit said. 'I like to have time to adjust it. But the other and main reason is for safety. I have to protect myself. Everyone knows all about the hoards of the hermits. Old misers, all of them. Storing up gold they can't take with them. And that is one reason I take the small stipend these people give me. I earn it, by the way. I do a good hermit act during the summer. They get their money's worth, and if they think I will do so much for so little, it may get around I'm actually poverty stricken.'

'And you enjoy tricking the tourists?'

'Tricking them? I suppose it could be put that way.

But my beard, though false, is a great inconvenience. I feel it alone entitles me to the stipend. And it is a help too. Everyone is used to me. I'm part of the landscape.'

'How many people know it is false?'

'No one,' Kermit said too quickly. He looked at his watch again. 'If you'll excuse me? I see I am several minutes behind schedule now. I'll never get my clothes clean in time.' He turned on the washing-machine switch, pointed with the other hand at a narrow road which led from the far side of the clearing. 'I wonder if you'd mind going down that way? For my peace of mind, I'd like to be certain you're gone. I don't think you can miss one of the cables that cross the roadway. It makes a sound up here, and I can check you out. Good-bye. Visiting hours are from ten a.m. until noon, next Thursday week.'

Jim Dunn walked slowly down the road the hermit had indicated. He made no effort to locate or avoid any buried warning cable, and when he passed around a bend he heard a loud clang from the direction of the hermit's house. 'I guess that checks me out,' he said aloud.

2

It was a mile or more along the old county road back to where Jim had left the car. The sun was really bearing down now, and Dunn was not too pleased with Kermit's inveigling him into the extra walk. He got in the Cadillac at last, rolled down the windows, and drove quickly to stir up a little breeze.

He drove directly to Walters' filling station for the morning Denver paper which was thrown off a truck at about ten-thirty.

The wheels of the Cadillac passed over the black warning cable, and the clang inside the station reminded Jim of the hermit's road. He grinned, waited for Walters to come out.

He lit a cigarette, smoked awhile, flicking ashes with careless abandon in the general direction of the ash-tray. He started to beep the horn for service, decided against it when he remembered he only wanted a paper, got out and went inside. George Walters was sitting at a desk covered with greasy battleship linoleum. He did not look up when Jim came in. All his attention was focused on the tabloid sized paper spread out before him.

'Morning!'

Walters jumped at Jim's greeting. 'Didn't hear you come in,' he admitted. 'Oh – it's you again.'

'Still me,' Jim said. 'You have an extra paper?'

Walters pushed one towards him, took the nickel with an automatic motion. Jim noticed then the man's hands were shaking, and when Walters started talking there was no doubt about the emotion which had brought the quaver to his fingers. George Walters was mad, violently and completely angry. And perhaps just a little bit afraid.

'Look at this!' Walters said. 'Look at it. Tom Cook has done it this time. Always thought he was too big for his britches. He's got no right to let them put things like this in the papers.'

Dunn had serious doubts as to Cook's ability to control the policies of this Denver daily. He looked over the sheet, found the story inside on page three. He skipped through the part about finding the plane, beyond noticing the passenger was listed simply as 'A Doctor Emerson,' found the paragraph to which Walters objected. 'Local police are seeking Dan Walters, finder of the wrecked

plane, to question him about the disappearance of a large sum of money.'

'They got no right to put that in the paper,' George Walters went on. 'They got no right to insinuate my boy is a common thief.'

'They just want to ask some questions. Hasn't Dan cleared it up by now?'

Walters' eyes wavered. 'Course Dan can clear it up. But they ought not put things like that in the paper. Once give a boy a bad name and he'll be accused of every bit of devilment in the whole county. No sir! Tom Cook's gone too far this time and I'm going to tell him so.'

'Good chance right now,' Jim said. 'He's just driving in.' In spite of the fact he expected it, Dunn jumped a little at the loudness of the clang as the Cook station wagon passed over the warning cable.

Walters got up and went out this time, but he lost most of his belligerency by the time he reached Cook's car. Jim lounged in the doorway, within easy hearing distance.

'I've seen that newspaper story,' Walters said. 'You oughtn't had that put in about Dan.' There was more pleading than anything else in the father's voice.

Tom Cook was quick to recognise that fact, to take advantage of the sign of weakness. 'Where is he then? He ran off, didn't he?'

'You can't say things like that.' Anger struggled again to get the upper hand.

'Where is he then?'

Jim understood the uncertainty behind Walters' indecision. 'I don't know where he is,' George said. 'He didn't come home last night. So what? Maybe he drove to Denver to have a good time or take in a show. Anything against the law about that? Any reason why Dan should have to check in and out? He's no kid, not any more.'

'Probably gone down to blow the money he lifted from that body,' Cook sneered. 'Mighty funny he'd pick a time like this to go off. Unless there's something wrong.'

Walters was goaded beyond power of control. 'That's what you say? Mighty funny, you say? I suppose you always know where that wife of yours is? I suppose you check her in and out?'

Cook jumped out of his station wagon, ran around towards the older man. Walters retreated far enough to snatch up a heavy tyre iron.

'Come on,' Walters said.

Jim moved quickly. There was violence in the air. There was the sudden flare of bitter hatred, of two men ready to fight for their belief in a son and a wife. Belief? Jim could not be sure. It was probably a combination of hopeful belief and real doubt which made the two men so prone to give way to their rage.

He stepped between them before Cook could get within striking distance.

'Better simmer down, both of you. Ordinarily I wouldn't think of interfering with another man's pleasure, but I can't see the point of this.'

'Think you can stop us?' Walters snarled.

'Why yes,' Jim said. 'I think I can.'

The assurance in his voice did more than physical violence to make the two men pause for a moment of thought. Walters threw the tyre iron down with a clang on the driveway. 'I shouldn't have said what I did,' he admitted. 'You made me sore. I didn't mean anything.'

'All right,' Cook said. 'Forget it. And George, I'm just trying to do my duty. You find Dan and tell him I want to see him. Just to have a talk.' Tom Cook retreated to his car, drove away.

Walters said, 'Good thing you stepped in. I'd have

crowned him sure.' The father snorted. 'Him saying Dan has gone to spend that lot of money. Sure funny he had to tap the till for twenty before he left if he had all that dough! Sure funny.'

'You haven't any idea where Dan is?' Jim asked.

'Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't,' the father said. He turned and walked slowly towards the station door, stopped and tossed words over his shoulder. 'I hear Amy Purdy's taking the bus to Denver.'

3

Before the day was over, Jim Dunn had about decided Geneva was losing its charm for him. Everywhere there was an air of last minute flurry, of expectation and frantic preparation. Mintern's Merc. did a land office business in soap powder and quick drying paint. There were fewer people hanging around the post office when Mrs. Mintern gave Jim the usual smile, but no mail. Red Andrus was nursing a gargantuan hangover, going through the motions behind the bar, but leaving most of the work to his partner. And of course the electric company picked that day to make repairs so the town was without power all afternoon, which meant it was also without water, and refrigeration.

By sunset, a hot flaring sunset with the thermometer hovering down towards the sixties, the general tension appeared to have extended itself even to the town dogs. They followed Jim and the Cadillac from one end of town to the other, barking vociferously. Later, they might be blasé with the rush of cars, but now the green sedan was an object of special interest.

Jim went to Purdy's Parlour for his evening meal,

determined to alternate his trade. The meal was good this time, and hot. In fact, it was very hot in the Parlour, and old Purdy was rushing around the kitchen preparing to bake. He did not seem to be in the mood for talk.

It was dark, and much cooler when Jim drove slowly back towards Alpine Lodge. The afternoon run-off had reached Geneva, and Silver Creek was roaring, tossing dark-coloured foam high against rocks, sweeping along bits of wood and beaver cuttings from high above. The creek would continue high until the night's chill stopped the high thawing, brought the water level down.

It was a beautiful night, and Jim did not feel like going to bed. He felt in one of his moods when a search for sleep would bring only a milling around, a useless and endless questioning of, 'Where are you going, Jim?'

He decided he might as well go in and sit with the Bucks as to listen to them through the thin wall. Sarah had been preparing their meals in the chalet's tiny kitchen, would continue to do so until the maid and tray service of the main lodge was begun. Jim wondered if Celeste had said anything to them about moving, decided there was no point in bringing that up.

Zebulion felt much better, if his bad disposition was any indication. He wanted to get up, and Sarah was against it.

'Let him try while I'm here,' Jim suggested. 'While I'm here to catch him when he falls down.'

'What's the matter with you tonight?' Buck demanded. 'Don't you know how to act around an invalid? Ever since you came in you've been jumping around. Sit down. Get up. Walk around. Sit down. Get up. And fidget fidget all the time.'

Dunn stood up again. 'You're getting better, all right! I don't know what's eating me. Maybe it's going to

storm. Anyhow it's like waiting for the other shoe to drop.'

'Well, go drop it somewhere else,' Buck suggested.

Jim went along the balcony to his own side of the chalet. Some time later, he realised he was pacing the floor. He realised the fact because Buck pounded on the wall and bellowed for quiet. 'Nothing the matter with his lungs,' Jim grinned. He undressed, crawled carefully into the over-soft bed. He knew he would not sleep a wink.

Sunlight streaming in awakened him. He looked at his watch, swore softly. A little after nine! He had come close to sleeping the clock round.

He was suddenly and amazingly hungry. He shaved and dressed quickly, being careful to make no sound which would disturb the still sleeping Bucks, went out into the bright sunlight. Breakfast was the first thing, and then a talk with Zebulion. The Bucks might even be able to make the trip back to Denver.

He had the door of the Cadillac open when he saw Tom Cook run out of his cottage, start the station wagon and speed towards him. Gravel spurted from the tyres as Cook slammed on the brakes.

'Hey, Dunn!'

Jim walked over.

'Get in if you want. You might as well come along on this.'

'Breakfast,' Jim said half-heartedly. He had a distinct feeling he was not going to get anything to eat for some time.

'Get in,' Cook said irritably. 'I've checked on you, know you're a detective. Used to be on the Force. You come along.'

Jim resigned himself, stopped any argument. He got in and Cook drove out of the rock arch at breakneck speed, never taking the station wagon out of second. 'Where we going?' Jim asked then.

'Up the old county road a way. Right near Beaver Brook. A guy up there cutting wood found Dan Walters.'

'Found him?'

'Yes. His head's nearly torn off his shoulders. Been dead some time.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A LEAN man in tattered denim shirt and faded jeans stepped from the brush at the side of the county road and flagged them down. Cook parked the station wagon on a gravel shoulder.

'Hello, Sam. You met Jim Dunn at fire meeting. Sam Turner.'

Turner said. 'Sure. Where in hell you been, Tom? I called you the better part of an hour ago.'

'Had a hard time locating Dr. Haynes,' Cook said. 'But he'll be along pretty soon.'

Turner spat in the roadway dust. 'Sure dry. And I won't be able to spit after tomorrow without having thirteen sports in three-hundred-dollar outfits, whipping the puddle with their flies. Well, come on. I'll show you where, and then come back for Haynes.'

Sam led the way up a winding deer trail, which, according to Jim's calculations came close to paralleling the Beaver Brook trail. Turner set a fast pace but that did not keep him from talking. 'A whole nest of beetle trees up here. Right close to this side of your property line, Cook. Roane told me to go ahead and cut them for firewood. Long as I got them out of the way and the bark burned before late June.' He explained in an aside to Jim, 'That's when the beetle larvae turn into beetles. Fred Roane marked a few other trees for cutting, just to make it worth my while. Good grade right down to the county road. A little work but they'll skid down easy. I

been working at this off and on for the last couple weeks, when I get time. This morning when I came, I saw a bundle of rags lying in a pile of limbs I'm waiting to burn. It was Dan all right. Stone dead then, but I don't think he'd been dead so very long.'

'What time did you find him?' Jim asked. Cook was saving all his wind for the climb.

'About eight-thirty, I'd say. I got a late start because I needed something at the store and had to wait for Mintern to open up.'

'It was after nine when you phoned,' Cook said.

Turner waved a hand at the timbered slope. 'You see any booths around here? I had to go clear down to the main highway, to Rickett's place. Waded the creek, even. Then I came back up like you told me' The upgrade levelled off, and in the flat place the smell of freshly cut ponderosa pine was strong in the warm air. 'Here we are,' Turner said.

Jim took a few moments to orient himself while Cook walked directly to the pile of slashing, bent over the body. Back to the left and not far below, he could make out the peaked roofs of the chalets, and the larger spot of colour which was the main Alpine Lodge. 'Looks as if it'd been closer to go get Cook instead of phoning.'

'Closer as the crow flies,' Turner agreed. 'But I ain't no crow. There's a steep pitch between here and there, some down timber from the wind five years ago come June, and a crumbly cutbank Quicker to go to the highway.'

Already Jim saw that Turner had taken down a dozen good sized trees. Perhaps half of them had the tell-tale pitch cones marring their reddish-brown bark, while the others had a pencilled number scratched into a blaze. The trunks had been stripped of branches, which were

piled near the centre of the clearing, as far as possible from other timber. The needles on some of the branches were already turning brown, and appeared brittle. The deer trail they had been following went on past the cuttings. It was more vague, less travelled, but it was not difficult for Jim to find where pebbles had been dislodged. 'Something's been along here recently,' Jim told himself. He looked around again. If he had his bearings correct, the cabin of Kermit the Hermit should be just over a small hogback. Dunn went a short distance along the trail, made certain it twisted in the general direction of the Beaver Brook path. The hard ground, with its liberal supply of loose rock, made it impossible to tell which way the recent user of the trail had gone. Dunn pushed between two mahogany bushes which nearly choked the path, brushed a wood-tick from his sleeve, forgot the creature at once. He reached out, detached one of the long black hairs carefully from the jutting branch. He left the other where it was.

Tom Cook had completed his examination of the body when Jim returned. He looked a little green. 'You want a look, Dunn? Be careful not to step in the blood.'

Dan Walters looked as if he had been thrown backward with considerable force. He lay partly on one side, resting in the crushed pine branches whose fading green was stained with a darker hue of dried blood. The arms were flung wide, and the head lolled over one shoulder at an impossible angle, telling mutely of a broken neck. A large, jagged wound on one side of his neck had bled copiously.

Sam Turner said conversationally, 'Looks like a bear clawed him. I saw a guy once had a snapped neck like that from one swipe of a bear's paw. Well, we all got to do it someday. At least he never knew what hit him.'

'He knew what hit him,' Jim amended, 'but he didn't know it very long.' He bent for a closer examination of the wound. 'You take your tools home with you every night?'

'Sure,' Turner said. 'I always do.' He thought a moment. 'By golly I guess I did leave my saw hanging over there yesterday.' He overdid the casualness.

'You know for sure whether you did or not,' Jim said. 'You wouldn't walk up here without being sure you had all the tools you were going to use.'

'Well,' Turner said. 'I thought I left my saw here last night. But it's not here now. Almost new, it was. A one man crosscut.'

Cook said, 'You better go down to meet Haynes. If you aren't there the doc's as apt as not to go on without waiting.'

Turner agreed with that, and went downhill quickly.

Cook said, 'You think the missing saw could have made that wound?'

'We'll know for sure when we find it, and when Haynes has made his examination,' Jim said. 'But it seems reasonable. You could hit a hard slice with a saw that heavy. If it's like the one man crosscuts I've seen. Weigh from five to eight pounds anyway.'

'Take a lot of strength,' Cook objected.

'Maybe. There's a matter of balance though. And maybe of knowing how. Anyway, whoever hit Dan Walters didn't have to take a second crack. Wonder what Walters was doing up here?'

'I'll find out when I make the arrest,' Cook said importantly. 'Probably someone lured him up here.'

For a second Jim thought Cook was joking, then saw the deputy was serious in his choice of words.

'Have to be someone he trusted,' Jim said. 'Or at least someone he wasn't afraid of.'

'Not necessarily,' Cook said. 'Maybe Dan was following somebody and they ambushed him.'

'I found something up the trail,' Jim said. 'You better take a look.' He led a reluctant Cook to where the black hair was caught on the bush. Tom was not impressed.

'So what?' Cook asked. 'Maybe a horse has been along here.' He pulled the strand from the bush, glanced at it and tossed it aside. 'That all you have to show me?'

The drawl in Jim's voice, usually almost unnoticeable, was very pronounced now. 'Yeah. I guess that's all I'll have to show you.'

Tom Cook noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He was travelling back down the trail towards the clearing and the sound of voices there.

2

Dr. Haynes said, 'He's been dead not more than four hours, not less than two. What time did you find him, Sam?'

'Eight-thirty,' Turner repeated. 'I was late because I had to wait for Mintern to open up.'

'All right,' Haynes said. 'Put the time of death between six and eight and you won't be too far off. Death probably caused by a broken neck. Even so the wound drained out a lot of blood, would have killed him in a very short time. The carotid artery is torn in two. There are three inch-deep penetrations, and a tearing side motion. That what you want to know for now, Cook?'

'Guess so,' Tom said.

Jim asked, 'Could the wound have been made by a blow from a crosscut saw?'

'Find the saw,' Haynes said, 'and I'll tell you more

about that. Send the body along when you get through here, Cook.' The old doctor hurried back down towards the road.

'You stay here with the body, Sam,' Tom said. 'I'll get some men up here to give you a hand getting it down.'

Turner nodded, picked out a shady rock and sat down. He said, 'Goddamn it. That was a nearly new saw.'

3

'You going to call in the sheriff?' Jim Dunn asked.

The deputy was smug. 'Don't think it'll be necessary. I believe I can clean up this terrible thing right away. That would be best, before the season opens.'

Jim sighed. 'Are you as big a fool as you act?'

Cook took his foot off the gas in surprise and the station wagon slewed to the side of the road. He wrenched it back. 'What was that?'

'Or maybe,' Jim went on conversationally, 'you're so smart you don't have to follow any of the usual routine. You don't bother to look around much at the scene of the crime. You don't care about finding the weapon. You don't care about the exhibit I found for you. You go off leaving the body in charge of the man who found it. How do you know Turner didn't whack Dan with his own saw?'

Cook laughed. 'The way you started off I thought maybe you had something constructive. You don't have to worry about Sam. He wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'What's that got to do with it?' Jim asked.

Tom ignored the question. 'You haven't been around here long enough to know the situation. That's where a resident has all the advantage. Now me, I know a great

deal about my friends and neighbours. I know just where to turn in a situation like this.'

Jim shook his head sadly. 'So now you're primed to make an arrest. After that you'll look for any evidence that fits into the pattern you want. And if something doesn't suit you, you destroy it.'

'You accusing me of destroying evidence?' Cook was angry.

'Sure,' Jim said. 'Well, get on with it. Make your arrest. Maybe you have the right of it. Maybe Roger Estes really did it.'

Tom Cook laughed and all of his self-confidence returned. 'What makes you think I'm going after Estes?'

'Thought your mind might work like that. Estes clips Dan on the jaw over a girl. Dan turns up dead. Deputy makes the pinch.'

'You see now what I meant by saying I had an advantage over you,' Cook chortled. 'The man I'm going to arrest is Harlan Purdy.'

Jim Dunn kept still.

'If you'd been around town longer,' Cook said, 'you'd know there was bad blood between the Walters' and old Purdy.'

'I know there were hard words,' Dunn amended. 'Maybe there's a difference. And I'm not even saying right now you may not be right. But there is one little matter. You have any proof?'

'I'll get it,' Cook said. 'And I'll get some help to Turner. I'll deputise him, and get men to comb the hills around the clearing.'

'Bully for you,' Jim said. 'Well, let me out at the Lodge. I'm either getting dizzy at the speed with which you solve murders, or else I'm starving to death.'

'You don't want to be in on the finish? I'll have a

confession from Harlan Purdy in fifteen minutes. You see, I'll have to admit I know something about this I haven't told.'

'That's good,' Jim said. 'Have you broken the news to the father, George Walters, yet?'

'No,' Cook admitted. 'Not yet. And I don't think I will until I have Purdy in custody. I don't want folks around here to take the law into their own hands.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZEBULION BUCK sat on the edge of his bed. He was shaved and dressed, but he did not look as if he were very ambitious. He poked at the tray of food Sarah had fixed for him.

Jim Dunn sank down in a nearby chair, watched Buck's efforts. 'You better eat that, or I'll take it away from you.'

'Go ahead. You want some coffee?'

'Sure. And a half dozen eggs, a pound of ham and a loaf of toast. That'll do for a start. Then I'll have a steak and potatoes, maybe a big bowl of crab gumbo. And then —'

'Stop it,' Sarah said. 'You'll make me hungry, and there's nothing else in the house. You know I didn't stock up, and anyway Zebbie says he feels up to driving down to Denver today.'

'I said "riding" down,' Buck amended.

'Sarah,' Jim said, 'can you swear this husband of yours was in the house all night?'

'That I can,' she answered. 'He snored like a buzz saw. So did you for that matter. What a duet!'

'I never snore,' Buck insisted. 'What's going on, Jim?'

Jim took his partner's tray, finished up what was left of the lunch. He said, 'Your friend Dan Walters is no longer with us. Somebody broke his neck with a cross-cut saw.'

Sarah gasped. Buck said angrily, 'That's a fine sort of joke to spring now.' He looked more closely at his friend. 'You actually mean it!'

Jim went to the kitchen cupboard, found a part of a loaf of bread Sarah had overlooked, began eating the dry pieces. 'Good thing you have an alibi. About the last thing you did before you passed out of the picture was to have words with young Walters.'

Sarah Buck said, 'Jim, you're mad about something. You don't act this way unless you're mad.'

'A murder!' Zebulion said. He darted a quick glance at Dunn. 'I get it now. I suppose you're the chief suspect, and we'll have to stick around until you're cleared?'

Jim swallowed the last of the dry bread. 'Nope. I guess I'm slipping. Nobody seems to suspect me of anything this time. Anyway Cook's gone down to make the arrest. Wants to clean everything up before the season opens.'

'He picking up Roger Estes?' Zebulion asked.

Jim shook his head. 'I thought he might work that way too. I even reminded him of Estes. But Harlan Purdy's Tom's boy right now.'

'Any particular reason?' Buck asked. 'Maybe you better tell me a little about this.'

'Harlan Purdy and Dan Walters didn't see eye to eye over Dan's paying court to Amy Purdy. Near as I can tell Roger Estes is the favoured suitor – where Pop is concerned. I don't know for sure how Amy feels. The other day, I heard Amy make a date with a girl friend in Denver to spend the night. Last night. Amy acted as if she had come to the crossroads, was making a vital decision. Amy left yesterday on the bus. Dan Walters vanished yesterday, taking twenty dollars from the filling station till. He turned up dead this morning, at a place not very far from where a man named Turner is cutting wood. Turner, Sam, if you want to get informal, thinks his saw is missing.'

'You get around,' Buck said, then added unkindly, 'or did Cook dig all that up this morning?'

Sarah put in quickly, 'You were on edge last night, Jim. Did you expect something like this to happen?'

'I felt something was going to happen. I didn't have any real reason to feel that way. I tried to tell myself everyone was on edge getting ready for the season. Right now, I hope old Purdy has a good alibi for early this morning. That'd upset Cook's applecart and make him at least look around a little.'

'Otherwise Cook'll hunt for evidence that points towards his choice?' Buck asked.

'Something like that. At the moment, Cook has an ace in the hole. He knows something I don't.'

'Is that possible?' Buck said in complete wonderment. 'So now what's your programme?'

'You and Sarah can go down to Denver if you want. In fact, a little later on I may have some chores for you there. I'm going to stick around here a few days.'

'Any particular reason you want to stick your nose into this?'

'Several. One reason is I think it hinges on the wreck of that plane. Another reason is Amy Purdy. She's a nice girl, and she has something on her mind. She's supposed to come home on today's bus. Maybe she'll find her father in jail, and certainly she'll find one of her boy friends dead. I want to meet the bus. Then, I want to pay another visit to the Hermit and take a look at his false beard. Also, I want to buy a one man crosscut saw in Mintern's Merc.'

'Sounds like a busy day for you,' Buck said. 'How about it Sarah, do we go or stay?'

'Before I forget,' Jim said. 'Mrs. Cook told me she had reservations on this place for tonight.'

'Then we'll stay, naturally,' Sarah said. 'I'm sure another day of rest won't hurt Zebbie any. And you know, Jim, I've never actually seen a real live hermit.'

'Come along with me,' Jim suggested. 'I don't know how real Kermit is, but he's alive.' Jim remembered the long strands of black hair. 'I hope he is anyhow. You come along and we'll drive up. You can watch me pull the fenders off that car of Zeb's.'

'Hey,' Buck complained. 'You can't both leave me. I'm an invalid. Don't you remember?'

'If you were well enough to ride down to Denver you're well enough to stay with yourself for a while,' Dunn said heartlessly.

Zebulion stretched out on the bed. 'All right. All right. But don't you two forget the devil finds mischief for idle hands!'

2

Sarah and Jim drove along the old county road, past the spot where a half dozen cars were now parked. The Cook station wagon was not among them. Jim did not slow down, drove on towards the turnoff to the hermit's cabin.

'That where it happened?' Sarah asked.

'That's the nearest place on this road.'

'Why would anyone go up there?' she asked.

'I can think of one good reason,' Jim said. 'He had a date. Or thought he did. Has Zeb said anything more about what he meant by "It's murder!"'

'He says he's pretty hazy about everything after you left the avalanche. But he remembers his feet and back were hurting terribly.'

'Oh, fine. And walking or moving was murder. I was in hopes he had seen something.'

'He still insists he saw someone on the trail above him. He doesn't talk much about that, Jim, because he thinks it was you, that you might have started the slide accidentally.'

'Anything's possible,' Jim said. 'But I would have known if the slide had started while I was on the trail. No, Sarah, it had already come down before I got there. I yelled for Tom Cook and the others to come down, and got back as fast as I could. I didn't dare take the short cut down. That would have sent more rocks towards the gully bottom.'

'Why do you think Dan Walters' death is connected with the plane crash?'

'The footprint, and the missing money. And I haven't got either one for evidence now. Dan Walters kicked the footprint to pieces. Hold your hat, Sarah, we go up from here.'

The road to the hermit's cabin was wider than the overhanging trees made it appear. There was no difficulty in spite of Jim's warnings and they reached the gravel-floored clearing without scratching a fender.

The Cadillac made tracks on the smooth surface as Jim turned it around, the only tracks Jim could see. 'We'll wait here for Kermit,' Jim decided. 'He ought to be ready for us.'

'What a cute little cabin,' Sarah said.

'Cute?' Dunn knew Sarah used the word only as an insult.

'It's a nice place I suppose,' she went on. 'I'd hate to live here though. Unless I could hire about a dozen boys to come in and play around for a day or two. But where's your hermit, Jim? From what you've said I thought he'd come boiling out, frothing at the mouth.'

'Probably having his hour of meditation,' Jim said. 'Or maybe he's eating. That's an idea. Let's go knock. Maybe he'll ask us in for a snack.'

'Funny he should have the screen door propped open with that old stick,' Sarah said idly. 'I should think the flies would get in.'

Dunn craned his neck. 'I can't see from this side.' He got out of the car, walked across the pristine gravel. He heard the door on Sarah's side clunk shut as she got out too.

The screen door was partly open. Sarah was right about that. She was wrong in thinking it was propped with a stick. A hand was wedged in the door, and it was the fingers that hung down and were visible.

The hermit was sprawled on the floor of his small, spotlessly clean kitchen. Jim pushed inside, with Sarah following, bent over the small figure.

Kermit opened one eye. 'Go away,' he said. He shut the eye again. A strong smell of whisky permeated the room.

Jim explored the swelling just behind the hermit's right ear. 'What an egg!' he said. He bent down, picked up Kermit without effort, carried him into the cabin's other room, put him down on a narrow couch. The covers had been folded back neatly, but the cot had not been made up for the day.

'What's the matter with him?' Sarah asked. 'Is he drunk?'

'Been drinking,' Jim said. 'And he either took a fall or something whacked him behind the ear.'

The living-bedroom was lined with shelves of books. A flat topped desk was near a window where light came in across neat piles of papers. Jim read a little of the top sheet. 'I wouldn't say my wife is a fresh air fiend, not

after these years, but I never knew anyone who could get a larger opening from a single window.' A geranium bloomed tidily in a paper-covered flower pot. Everything was neat except the unmade bed, and the cap and black beard which were on the floor in a corner. Jim bent over the hermit's disguise. The black beard was matted, and a pine needle was still tangled in the long hair.

Kermit the Hermit groaned, and Dunn went back to his side. 'What happened, Kermit? Did someone hit you?'

'Roan,' Kermit mumbled. 'The Roan Stallion.'

3

Zebulion Buck was glad the decision not to return to Denver that day had been made. It was not that he felt so badly, it was the limpness of all his muscles which bothered him. He stretched out with his hands locked behind his head, tried to bring his mind into focus on the things Jim had told him. He did not like inaction. He knew he was due for a rest in any event, but he certainly did not want to take it this way. He did not see how he could figure out the answers to any questions, until his foggy wits cleared enough to ask the questions!

He could hear sounds of unusual activity from the grounds of Alpine Lodge, the sound of arriving motors, of voices. Somewhere a carpenter hammered frantically for a few minutes. Zebulion had to admit it was more enjoyable to rest when there were sounds of other people working.

He must have dozed a little, because his head snapped up when someone knocked. 'Come in!'

Celeste Cook pushed the door open. 'Sorry to disturb

you,' she said. 'I did wonder about this chalet for the night. Would you three mind if I had you moved to the main lodge? Dinner will be served there the first time this evening.'

'Sit down,' Zebulion said. 'If you don't mind my not getting up?'

'Not at all,' Celeste said. Her sweeping glance took in the condition of the chalet. Apparently she was reassured by what she saw.

Buck could tell she had calculated to a nicety the amount of time it would take to prepare the chalet-duplex for future occupancy. 'We're just about all packed, here. I don't know about the other side. But I'm sure we'll be just as comfortable in the main lodge.' Buck noticed then that Celeste had left the door open, and she sat where she would have an unrestricted view of the lodge terrace and the driveway to the gate. He had to admit she appeared very attractive in her cream-coloured riding pants and lime silk blouse.

Celeste smoothed the blouse material, picked at a seam with red-tipped fingers. 'I wonder just how much your partner, Jim Dunn tells you?'

Buck crossed his fingers. 'He tells me everything.'

She smiled. 'I'll bet he does. But this time I'm glad. I won't have to go into too much detail. I don't feel any too happy about my part in this. Especially now Dan Walters is dead. But I don't know. I couldn't have seen it would turn out that way, could I?'

'It's easier to have hindsight than foresight,' Buck said sententiously. He wondered what in the world this woman had told Jim. Something pretty personal, he decided. 'However, if you want my advice, it might be better if you began at the beginning.'

'I don't know whether I want advice or not,' Mrs. Cook

said. 'I do want to get my story on record. Oh, I know you don't have any official standing in the case. But you do have some sort of official standing. And as long as my husband is in charge of the Walters case, I'll never tell the story. Not to him, certainly. So let's see, should I go back to my grandfather's will?'

'As good a place as any,' Buck said blandly. 'Jim didn't go into too many details.'

Celeste Cook smiled. 'You're a bluffer, Mr. Buck. I didn't tell Jim anything about a will.'

Buck chuckled. He was completely unabashed at being caught. 'Good idea,' he said. 'I wouldn't trust that Jim Dunn too far.'

Her smile faded away, was replaced by seriousness. She appeared to be choosing her words carefully. 'I won't bother you with too many girlish details. Some, I have to say, so you'll understand my position. My parents died when I was five, and a grandfather, a widower, brought me up. He was pretty strict and did not like some of the things I did in my teens. He high pressured me into a marriage with Tom Cook, which was easy enough because grandpa controlled the money. He died just after I was married and left the estate income to me. I've used that income in fixing up this place. I've done a good job, if I do say so, and I make it pay. But I was to have complete control of the estate provided I was still married to Tom at the end of five years, and there had been no scandal.'

'And now there's a chance for a scandal?'

'No. Not a chance. The time's up next month. Tom won't do anything until I get the money. Then – well, he'd just as soon be rid of me – but he does want quite a bit of the money.'

'Why should he want to be rid of you?' Buck asked.

'Thanks,' Celeste said. 'A main reason is I'm successful in my business dealings. He isn't. I make money. He doesn't. I really and honestly don't care what people think of me. Tom does. I've never known a man who valued other people's opinions more, and then went out of his way so far to alienate them. Tom knows I'm actually much smarter than he is. But he keeps trying. Lately he's been trying to collect evidence of improper behaviour on my part. He intends using it as a threat, to make me give him a larger split of the estate.'

'So far,' Buck said, 'it sounds like an ideal marriage.'

Celeste shrugged. 'I get pretty bored up here in the winter. For a while I could fill in my time working and planning improvements to this place. Nearly everything is worked out now. It runs too smoothly to be interesting. I'm not boasting, really. I guess I'm halfway apologising for what I started. You see, I decided to teach Tom another lesson.'

Zebulion would have liked to ask about some of the past lessons also, but he contented himself with saying, 'And your plan?'

'Amy Purdy's voice really gave me the idea. You wouldn't know it, if you see her when she's talking, but our voices are slightly similar. Close enough so they might be mistaken through the walls of one of these duplex-chalets for instance. Dan Walters was that way about Amy. He even wanted her to run away and marry him. She wouldn't, wouldn't leave her Pop.'

Buck said, 'I'm afraid I begin to see your plan.'

Celeste's lips curled a little. 'Afraid? Well, perhaps that's the right word. I offered Dan the use of one of the chalets – for a long talk with Amy. So they could get things settled. I offered them that isolated duplex. The twin to this one.'

'And then you took pains to make your husband think you were going to meet someone there?'

'Correct.'

'You didn't care what the plan might do to Miss Purdy?'

'She's young.'

'How did the plan work out?'

'It started out as planned. Dan got Amy off the Denver bus at Spruce Junction, brought her back up here just about dusk. Just the time of day when it's most difficult to actually identify anyone. Tom had been watching, and he managed to get into the other side of the duplex.'

'Just a minute,' Buck said. 'Your husband would know Dan Walters' car, wouldn't he?'

'He might.'

Buck looked at the woman curiously, wondered if she knew what she was saying. 'Then what happened?' he asked.

'I don't know for sure. Tom came back to our place shortly after midnight. I was having a nightcap. He was in a good humour, very pleased with himself, as if he thought he had the world by the tail. And he had his recording machine set up in one side of the duplex. I know that, because he had the box the wire comes in. He would play with it a while, and laugh. I thought I'd really taken him in, and that he hadn't had the nerve to crash in on the other side and find out I really wasn't there.'

'He didn't appear surprised to find you at home?'

'No. I wondered about that. Of course this morning, when he made a bee line to arrest Harlan Purdy, I realised he did know Amy was with Dan.'

Buck asked, 'It didn't occur to you your husband might single out old Purdy to arrest in order to cover up for himself?'

'Come again?' Celeste suggested.

'Perhaps your husband actually believed you were in the duplex with Dan Walters. Perhaps he lost his temper and did something about it. Wouldn't it be natural for him to look around for a fall guy?'

'That's silly,' Celeste said. 'You don't know Tom. It was the money he was interested in.'

Buck went on. 'Say it was. With Purdy ticketed for the killing there would be no scandal about you, would there? Some people think being mixed up in a murder is scandalous.'

'I don't know whether I like you or not,' Celeste said. 'But anything you think of me, I deserve. I always say anyone who goes out of their way to help someone, deserves – and usually gets – a kick in the face.'

'I don't see who you're helping,' Zebulion said.

'Harlan Purdy.'

'You've supplied him with a pretty good motive.'

'I guess I'd better tell you the rest after all. Though I don't think you're as understanding as your partner. Anyway, after Tom went to bed, I decided I'd better take a look around, find out what went on. I started walking up that way. I heard a car motor start up. It raced past me miles an hour, but I could make out Amy Purdy leaning out of the right hand front seat, looking back. I got the impression a man was driving. Naturally I thought Dan and Amy had decided to leave, though I did think it was a sedan instead of a coupé that whizzed past. I walked on a little farther. The lights were on in the chalet, and a light was on on the balcony. Dan Walters was there, rubbing his jaw, and swearing. I ducked again, and he walked down the drive past me.'

'What time was all this?'

'I don't know.'

Zebulion wondered if she actually did not know, or was waiting to fill in a time which would be most convenient for her. 'It might have been Harlan Purdy driving the car.'

'No. That's the point of this whole story. Purdy had never learned to drive. He doesn't hold with cars. So Amy was away from Geneva before her father could find out about her meeting.'

'I see.' Zebulion saw no point in showing up any holes in that idea. 'Are you going to tell all this to the authorities?'

'When my husband is the authority? Don't be silly.

'Why not tell it to the sheriff then? Save Purdy some bad times maybe.'

'I'll tell it in a month,' Celeste said.

'I see. After the probation period of the estate has passed. But what makes you think I won't tell the sheriff or your husband?'

Celeste stood up, walked closer to the bed. 'I think your wife is driving in now with your partner. And why won't you tell? Poor man. He's had such a fever. Probably delirious.' Celeste put a cool hand on Buck's forehead. 'I can always deny anything you say, stall along for the necessary time. That is, if anyone listens to you at all.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SARAH BUCK and Jim Dunn came into the chalet while Celeste's hand still stroked Zebulion's forehead. As soon as Buck saw his wife come in, he sighed loudly and with overdone enjoyment, then paraphrased a cigarette commercial, 'Ahhh! That's better.'

Sarah put out her tongue at her husband, smiled sweetly at Mrs. Cook. 'So nice of you to drop in and look after the invalid,' she said.

'He seems much better, much stronger,' Mrs. Cook said with equal sweetness. She walked towards the door. 'I'll send someone by to help you with your things. I'm sure you'll like the main lodge much more.'

Sarah closed the door firmly after her, turned to stare at Zebulion. 'You and your idle hands,' she said. 'If you're that much stronger, perhaps we'd better go to Denver after all.'

Buck laughed. 'It's wonderful, Jim. She's actually jealous.'

'Lo, the stolid Indian,' Jim said. 'Did anything happen besides your getting your head rubbed? I mean,' he went on quickly, 'did you find out anything?'

The laughter slipped away from Zebulion as he told of the things Mrs. Cook had come to relate. 'I don't quite get it,' he finished. 'Did she come here to throw her husband to the wolves – meaning us? Or does she actually want to have the story on record? The way she did that is fairly clever. She can deny anything she told me if she

has to during the next month. But she'll still be safe, still have told someone about the activity around here last night.'

'This wasn't the only place where there was action,' Jim said. He told of finding the dazed hermit. 'And when he came around and mumbled about "The Roan Stallion" I thought he meant the forest ranger. It took Sarah to catch on it was the title of a book of verse, and the hermit's hiding place. There were four one-hundred-dollar bills stuck in the pages. When Kermit found they were still there, he decided he'd just slipped and fallen in the kitchen.'

'But you think someone slugged him?' Buck asked.

'Either that,' Jim said, 'or Kermit himself had his beard out for an airing.'

'Someone slugged him – but why?'

'Probably to use the beard,' Jim said. 'It'd make a good disguise for almost anyone, and Kermit himself told me people were so accustomed to seeing him around they barely noticed. I checked the strand of hair I found caught on that bush. As far as I can tell, it matches, though we'd need a lab to make certain.'

'And of course, Kermit could say he'd caught the beard on the bush some other time.'

Jim nodded. 'That isn't all either. Tom Cook threw away the hair I left on the bush for evidence. Which fixes everything up fine. I have two great pieces of evidence now. A footprint that has been kicked to pieces, and a hair which has been thrown away.'

'Real progress,' Buck admitted. 'You want to tell me what you think, Jim? I mean, put it into simple enough words so a convalescent can understand?'

'Why not? I think someone found the plane wreck shortly after it happened. I think that person lifted the

money from the dead man's pocket. I think the old prospector saw or heard something. He "fell" over the edge of that slide. Dan Walters was friendly with the prospector. Dan found the wreck and reported it. Maybe he had found it before, but somehow I don't think so. He reported it for the reward he thought might come. Well, Dan is dead now too.'

Buck said, 'Dan could have found the money, and been killed for it.'

'Possible,' Jim admitted.

'That hermit's beard,' Buck mused. 'I don't quite get that. It would be a lot of trouble.'

'Not too much,' Jim pointed out. 'It wasn't far to the cabin. Kermit had been drinking heavily. I wouldn't be surprised if he does that periodically. In the early morning light, the beard would have been a wholly practical disguise, on the off chance that the killer might have been seen.'

'It would mean that the killer had to know the beard was false,' Zebulion pointed out.

'We figured that out on the way back down,' Sarah put it. 'Though it doesn't narrow the field very much. Zebbie, you've heard of Kermit Foster Lewis, haven't you?'

'The humorist? Yes. I think his stuff is very unfunny. Wait a minute, are you saying this Kermit is that Kermit?'

'You're confusing me,' Sarah said. 'But I guess the answer is yes. Anyway this Kermit is a writer. He mails off manuscripts. He gets them back, or cheques or letters or something.'

'And the Minterns run the post office,' Zebulion picked it up. 'I can see they might be in the know as to the real identity of the pseudo hermit. Who else?'

'Harlan Purdy used to run the post office,' Jim said.

'So he could know. And his daughter Amy. Which would make it sort of an open secret.'

'Not necessarily about the beard,' Buck objected.

'Don't be so stubborn, Zebbie. At least if Jim is right about the beard being used for a disguise, someone knew it was false.'

Zebulion was willing to go that far. 'And you'd put the money as the motive for the killing? Or killings?'

'Money first,' Jim said. 'And then the necessity of covering up. Now I happen to know young Mintern is pressed for cash. At least I saw him give a wholesaler a predated cheque.'

'If he'd found the dead man's money, he wouldn't be short.'

'Or didn't want to bring out any of it right now,' Jim amended. 'But from what you've told me of Mrs. Cook and her husband, they would have a good reason to want to cover up lifting the dead man's money.'

'But they wouldn't need it,' Buck objected.

'I've never heard that having money was any reason for people not to want some more,' Jim said. 'And I don't think Tom Cook has very much to play with anyway.'

Buck said slowly, 'That will business makes a good blackmail set-up. All right. Anyone else on your list?'

'It's only a list, so far,' Jim said. 'I'd be inclined to leave George Walters out. He loved his son, or gave a darn good impression, and I don't think he'd kill Dan.'

'Leave him out for now,' Buck said agreeably. 'Who else?'

'Harlan Purdy and Dan didn't get along at all. Presumably it was because of the daughter Amy. But from what I've heard old Purdy is well off, and a miser, a pinch penny, and greedy for more money.'

'And his dislike for Dan could come from the fact Dan had something on him, knew something – perhaps through the old prospector – about Purdy's finding the money?'

'It's a thought,' Jim admitted. 'I've tried to eliminate some of these people by finding out whether or not they skied or used snow-shoes. Some admit they do. Some say they don't. It's hard to take anyone off the list for that reason. But Red Andrus apparently dislikes the mountains most, wouldn't go around in them by himself if he could avoid it.'

'You'd leave him out?'

'No,' Jim said. 'There's something about him doesn't ring true. He was in friendly talk with the bar-tender at the Tyrolean Room, closed up like a clam when I came. And the bar-tender said he'd never met the gentleman. I think we'll be able to find out something about Mr. Andrus from his fingerprints.'

'You have them?'

'Not yet. But I will. Somehow. And then there's the partner, Roger Estes. I know, from the number of customers I've seen in the Corral Bar and Grill, the place hasn't been making expenses this winter. Maybe Estes found the money, figured finders keepers.'

Sarah Buck put in. 'Wait a minute, Jim. You can't do that to Roger. From what Zebbie told us about the goings-on here last night, I have a different role for Roger Estes.'

'As Sir Galahad?' Jim asked.

'Or Prince Charming. Or maybe just a friend in time of need. I'd say he was the one who removed Amy from the duplex-chalet. We've seen him take care of Dan before – Oh — '

'Yes,' Jim said. 'If Estes is in love with Amy Purdy, he has no reason to be fond of Dan Walters. He might

have taken the girl away, and come back to finish Dan – for good.'

'I don't believe it,' Sarah said stoutly. 'Roger isn't that kind.'

'You may be right. But Roger has some sort of hold on Red Andrus. Red says Roger puts the evil eye – or the "Whammy" on him to keep him in line.'

'That's silly,' Sarah said.

Jim shook his head. 'Not to Red Andrus, it isn't. And of course, if you want to leave out the money for a while, there's Amy Purdy herself.'

Sarah shook her head again. 'No. Not Amy. Maybe Lucy Mintern, but not Amy. And I don't think Lucy could do such a thing either. Not from what you've said about the weapon, Jim.'

'One reason I'm going to buy a saw,' Dunn said. 'But if you don't care for Amy, how about our limping friend, Fred Roane?'

Buck said, 'Even after being in Washington, I'd protest a little on that one. I don't think forest rangers are picked from a class of men who would be apt to go hog wild over finding a bunch of money.'

'Then why did he pretend to sprain his ankle?' Jim persisted.

'Maybe he was tired of us,' Buck said rather weakly. 'Well, Jim, you've done a lot of background work. It's a good thing the old master – meaning myself – is about on his feet again. You want me to take over from here?'

Jim grinned at his partner. 'I sure do. I want you to take over on the spade work. In Denver. I took down the numbers of the hundred dollar bills the hermit had cached away. Do you know whether there was a record of the bills the dead man carried? The plane crash victim, I mean.'

'There is probably a record,' Buck said. 'Considering where the plane passenger got those bills. I can find out. What else?'

'Red Andrus' fingerprints. Check them.

'Can do – if you get them for me.'

'Financial situation of the Corral Bar and Grill. Anything about Estes' background you can get.'

'That may be harder.'

'Not for you, surely,' Jim kidded. 'And the same for the young Minterns. I may be stymied in my work here, Zeb. We may have to go farther back.'

'I'll see what I can do. You want me to look up that will Celeste told me about too?'

'Sure. Knowing the lady, even slightly, I'd say she is quite capable of making the whole thing up.'

'That ought to keep me busy for a while,' Buck admitted.

'One other thing,' Jim said. 'You might call on this girl friend of Amy's. This Priscilla.'

'That'll be easy,' Buck said. 'Especially without a last name. How do I find her?'

'And you're a detective?' Jim put in. 'Never mind, I'll get the name for you.'

Zebulion let his head fall back on the bed. 'It makes me weary just thinking of all that work. How about it, Sarah? You want to drive me down, after the master-mind here picks up a few details?'

'I don't think so,' Sarah said. 'I think I want to move into the main lodge here. I'm going to enjoy having someone else prepare food for awhile. I'm tired of standing over that hot electric grill for ten or fifteen minutes three times a day.'

Buck looked at his wife suspiciously. 'I don't know. I don't think it'd be safe to leave you here. I think you have some idea.'

Sarah laughed. 'If it were you now – I know it wouldn't be safe.'

'All right, Jim,' Buck grumbled. 'If you get the things you want I'll drive down tomorrow.'

'You sure you'll feel up to it?' Jim asked.

'Of course I will,' Buck said. 'I feel all right.'

'Good,' Jim said heartlessly. 'Then you can ride the bus down tomorrow. Sarah and I might need the car.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A GREAT change had come. There were cars everywhere. Cars pulling trailers, cars pulling boats, cars with boats on top. Old model cars crammed with people, new model cars with clothes on hangers in the otherwise unoccupied back seat. Jeeps and pick-up trucks, station wagons and convertibles.

One thing they had in common, a terrific urge to get to some distant, favourite place before it was jammed.

Their motors echoed back from canyon walls. They whooshed down dips, honking to pass on curves, honking to pass on up grades, just honking.

Older cars and trucks held up the long string on grades where double yellow lines warned of no passing. The white sedans of the highway patrol kept cars in line with their momentary presence, only to have them turn and cut in and out like mad beetles when 'the law' had passed.

Camp grounds began to fill up, tents were pitched, cabins occupied. The solitude of early spring and all winter was broken. Radios boomed, camp-fires elbowed each other, the crash of axes, breaking of dead wood, shrill voices were everywhere. The deer moved up to higher, and drier valleys. The ouzels skimmed frantically back and forth along creeks and ponds, only pausing to go into their jumping dance or catch small trout. Beaver stopped their spring repair work, submerged to watch with large brown eyes. Trout jumped, for the early

warmth and fairly low water brought insects to their attention.

The green truck of the Fish and Game Department sped in and out of canyons, toured favourite holes. Always a few, spurred on by the sight of trout, falsely promised isolation by what they considered out-of-the-way places, jumped the gun and fished a day too soon. The game warden could not, of course, be everywhere, but it always surprised a good many eager fishermen, to find out just how many places he could be.

Campers looked with pleasure at the blazing sun in the cloudless sky. It would be cold at night in the higher elevations, tomorrow promised more sunshine, more warmth, excellent weather.

In the look-out stations men kept constant watch for the tell-tale pencils of smoke which might mean the start of a fire or only an enthusiastic camper. They looked in vain for clouds, found no hope in the weather forecasts or the steadily dropping humidity.

2

Jim Dunn waited until a slow moving oil tanker truck brought a short break in the line of traffic, darted the Cadillac across the highway and parked in front of Mintern's Mere.

Bob Mintern stood in the front window watching the cars flash past. He smiled when Jim came in. 'Well, tomorrow's the big day. Looks as if we'd have a good season. Get off to a good start anyway.'

'Not many of them stopping here,' Jim pointed out. He was the only customer in the store.

'Not now,' Bob said. 'These people are heading for

their own cabins or for special places. But they'll be up at the crack of dawn. Shouldn't be too hard to get their limit of ten fish this kind of weather, with the streams low. Tomorrow there'll be traffic both ways, and plenty of people will stop.'

'You have it worked out pretty well.' Dunn said.

'Yes. It's like this every year. If the weather is good. And of course we have Memorial Day coming up. We won't know whether we're afoot or horseback from now on.' He noticed Jim was looking around and asked professionally, 'You wanted something?'

'A saw,' Jim said. 'A one man crosscut.'

Mintern wet his lips. 'A saw? Didn't know you were going to be around here that long.'

'Never can tell,' Dunn said.

'Come back this way,' Mintern said. 'I don't suppose it'll matter to you, but I'll have to report your purchase to Tom Cook. He told me something about a saw being the thing that killed Dan Walters, wants to know if anyone tried to replace their saw. From what I hear though, sounds to me as if Sam Turner's saw will be the one to replace.'

'Do you have one just like it?' Jim asked. He had his own opinion about Cook's ability as a talker. The deputy might have waited at least until it was proved Turner's saw was the murder weapon.

'Only sold it to him a few weeks ago,' Mintern said. 'I had about four left, I believe. Come back this way if you want.'

Jim followed along to the hardware department in the store's rear. The room was high ceilinged and the walls and every bit of available space were crowded with filled shelves, bins for nails, racks for various tools.

'I try to keep a pretty good stock,' Mintern said.

'Some items are getting scarce now, but I do the best I can.' He led the way along a narrow passage. 'Watch your step on those snow shovels. I was trying to get them out of the way this morning. Looks like we won't need them any more this year. I didn't quite finish putting them away, before I got interrupted, by Sam Turner.'

'He said you were late opening up.'

'Guess I forgot to unsnap the catch on the front door when I came in this morning. I was sure here early enough. Just before six. But as I told you, I was working back here and well – sometimes I forget to turn on my hearing-aid. I didn't hear Sam anyway, and he said he pounded. Now here's the saw. One just like Turner's. Only six ninety-five.'

Jim took the shining, wicked toothed, four foot blade by its yellow handle. He tested the points of the inch long teeth with a cautious thumb.

'It's plenty sharp,' Mintern said. 'You'll get a lot of good use from that saw.'

'Hope you're right,' Jim said. He paid Mintern when they had gone back out front.

The post office window was closed. 'Your wife isn't here?' Jim asked. 'Thought I'd see if there was any mail.'

'Lucy's resting,' Bob said. 'This time of year we have to take every chance to get a little rest.' He took keys from a side pocket, unlocked the post office cubicle, went inside and flipped through the mail in General Delivery. 'Nothing here for you or your partner,' he said. 'Did you ask at the main lodge, where you're staying? Sometimes one of the Cooks pick up mail for their guests.'

3

Jim slid the saw on to the back seat of the Cadillac, only made one three-cornered tear in the upholstery. Across the way, Walters' filling station was locked tight, and Purdy's Parlour also had the closed sign on the front door.

Jim walked down to the Corral Bar and Grill, found Red Andrus standing near the front window which rattled in its frame with the heavy traffic.

'Boy, look at them go!' Andrus said. 'From now on this will be a busy place. Last year I about had it figured out. The percentage I mean, the percentage of cars that stop.'

'You interested in percentages?' Jim asked.

Andrus turned full around. 'What's it to you?' he demanded.

'Making conversation,' Jim shrugged. 'Any chance of getting something to eat while I'm waiting for the bus?'

'No,' Red said. 'You going somewhere?'

'No,' Jim was equally short.

Andrus went around behind the bar. 'You must be planning on meeting somebody then?'

'Could be,' Jim admitted. 'Where's Estes?'

'That's the catch about your eating,' Andrus said. 'Rog, he picked this morning, of all times, to go to Denver for a load of supplies. No telling when he'll get back. Probably all snarled up in traffic.'

'What time did he go?'

'How should I know? He just left me a note saying he was gone. Any particular time you're interested in?'

'You don't sound very co-operative,' Jim said.

'My voice must be changing. Very upsetting.

'I'm sure.' Jim got off the stool, started out.

'You going to meet Amy Purdy on the bus?'

Jim kept on going.

'Wait a minute. I'll buy you a drink. Sure wish you'd do me a favour.'

Jim turned around and smiled. 'After your pleasant lead up, how could I resist you?'

Andrus grunted. 'Anyhow, I wish you'd let Rog meet Amy. Give the guy a break.'

'Thought you said he wasn't here?'

'He isn't. But he probably will be. No telling how late the bus'll be. I think Rog ought to be the one to break the bad news to Amy.'

'You're sure it'll be news?' Jim asked. He closed the door behind him before Andrus could answer.

4

Jim carried the crosscut saw into the Bucks' half of the duplex, found his partner and Sarah there, but very much in the process of being moved.

'What you got, your toothbrush?' Zebulion asked.

'You're already moved,' Sarah said. 'You have the Matterhorn room in the main lodge.'

Dunn did not think that sounded very comfortable. 'You have time to try a little experiment for me, Sarah?'

'With that thing?' she asked. 'I probably wouldn't even be able to lift it.' She took the saw by its yellow handle, her small fingers appearing ineffectual. 'It's not as heavy as it looks.'

'Hit sideways with it,' Jim suggested.

'Like this?' Sarah started the blade on a sweeping arc,

which ended against the leg of a table, knocked it over. Buck rescued a lamp.

'For heaven's sake,' Sarah said. 'Once you get the thing started, it seems to travel by itself. You want me to try again?'

'I don't want to be a spoil-sport,' Zebulion said, 'but any more experiments I'd suggest you do outside. Sarah might hit one of the walls and knock this whole place down.'

'Good idea,' Jim admitted. 'If this place wasn't ready for the reservations, I'd probably lose my chance to sleep in the Matterhorn!' He and Sarah went outside to the balcony, then down the steps.

Jim found a heavy chunk of stove wood, stood it upright in the patch of sunlight between the steps and the car. 'Swing as hard as you can this time,' Jim ordered. 'I want to see how far the teeth will go into the wood.'

'Look out for the car,' Buck reminded.

Sarah took a firm grip on the handle, swung the blade back, put her shoulder into the forward sweep. The long, shining blade slittered in the light. It missed the top of the chunk of wood by several inches, missed the car bumper by a hair's breadth, ended up against a front tyre.

The tyre exploded.

Zebulion Buck did not say a word. He walked down the steps slowly, went past Jim and Sarah who stood looking at the saw in amazement.

'Zebbie,' Sarah said.

He kept on walking.

'Zebbie! I'm sorry. Where are you going?'

'I saw an axe around here somewhere,' Buck said. 'I'll get it and we can finish the job.'

'Well,' Jim pointed out, 'we know a little more now. And you sure ought to be thankful, Zeb.'

That stopped Buck. 'Thankful? With tyres the way they are?'

'Sure,' Jim said. 'Just suppose you'd been going ninety miles an hour when that blow-out happened.'

5

Jim walked back to the centre of Geneva, leaving the car to the ministrations of some of the attendants at the Lodge. He did not have very long to wait this time before the bus from Denver pulled in, stopped only long enough to let Amy Purdy dismount, and then struggled back into the line of traffic.

The girl looked around expectantly, but she did not appear too pleased when Jim spoke, 'Hello, Miss Purdy!'

Not very many people could resist Jim's smile when he really turned it on.

'Oh – hello,' Amy said. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her face had new lines of strain. 'Why – why the Parlour is closed. What's the matter?'

'I'll carry your bag over for you,' Jim suggested. He held out his hand. She hesitated, then put the little over-night case in it. 'How was Priscilla?' Jim wanted to know.

'Priscilla? You know Priscilla Dean?'

'If she's the one lives out on East Colfax, I do.

Amy forced a smile. 'Can't be the same one. Priscilla lives on the North side.'

'So that's the way you do your work, Dunn?'

Jim had heard no sound of anyone coming, but he did not have to turn around to recognise Roger Estes' voice. An angry voice.

'Work?' Jim said. 'So you made it back from Denver?'

That appeared to add still more fury to the spark he had kindled in Roger Estes.

Estes took off his glasses, put them in a side pocket.

Jim let the bag slide from his fingers. He wanted to have his hands free. He noticed one of Estes' eyes was slightly off centre without the correction of the lenses. 'So that's where the "whammy" comes in,' he said aloud.

Estes cooled off fast, put his glasses back on. 'Where do you come in on this, Dunn?'

Jim relaxed. 'It seems to me a little conversation is indicated.'

Estes took the girl's arm, and she looked up at him with bewilderment plain on her face.

'Some other time,' Roger Estes said. 'You must know this is hardly the time or the place.'

'Why?' Jim asked. 'Doesn't Miss Purdy know her father's been arrested for Dan's death?'

Estes snarled something, but Jim was watching the girl. Every bit of colour drained from her face, leaving the dark smudges standing out in high relief.

'Rog! About Pop! You didn't tell me about Pop!' She ran towards Purdy's Parlour.

Estes hesitated, then followed. He turned and asked over his shoulder, 'You proud of yourself now?'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE ranger station was orderly, but no longer neat. Rows of packs were resting against the walls. Filled canteens were ready. Outside, two-man pumps were filled, ready to torture their carriers up steep trails. Assorted tools were in neat piles. Axes, polaskis, shovels, long reels of hose in the improbable event a fire would break out within a half mile or so of water.

As Jim came up the gravel walk, three men came out of the station, jumped in a loaded pick-up truck and sped away. Inside, Fred Roane was sitting at his desk. He was hunched over, his face was still sooty, and he smelt strongly of smoke. If he was glad to see Jim, he managed to conceal it very well.

'Don't suppose you've come to volunteer as a stand-by?'

'Might help, if it's necessary,' Jim said. 'How's the ankle?'

'Ankle? What —? Oh yes. It's all right. Quite well in fact.'

'That's good,' Jim said. 'You've been busy?'

'Pretty busy,' Roane admitted. 'Fifteen little fires today. We caught them all just starting though, got them out. Lucky. But it won't hold. I'm trying to get the whole area closed to all campers and fishermen.'

Jim whistled. 'Bad as that? Shouldn't think that would make you very popular around the resorts. With the season opening tomorrow.'

'The season! We'll have a fire in this district that'll put an end to the season if it doesn't snow or rain!' The desk phone rang.

Jim thought Fred Roane unwilling to pick it up, expected to hear more bad news. The ranger forced his hands to obey, said, 'Roane speaking,' into the mouthpiece. 'Yes. . . . Yes . . . You got it out all right? Good. Make sure someone stays to watch it and I'll be out to check as soon as I can.' He hung up, rubbed his reddened eyes with the cleanest spot on his wrist.

'Another one?' Jim asked.

'Little brush fire. Ranchers caught it. Keeps on like this I'm going to have all possible men watching burns to make sure they don't get going again. Well. Obviously my problems aren't too much on your mind. What is?'

'Your ankle,' Jim said bluntly.

'Oh? Why?'

'You didn't sprain it. You didn't want to go up to the Red Cone district with my partner and myself. Was that because you knew what we were going to find?'

'No.' Roane appeared willing to let the matter rest on the simple negative.

Jim went on calmly. 'You get around the mountains a lot even in the dead of winter. You're the logical person to have found the wrecked plane. And someone did find it long before Dan Walters reported it.' Jim told the ranger of the footprint.

Roane at least was impressed by that bit of evidence. 'You're probably right on that. And it could have been Old Joe. Though he doesn't wander around much, or didn't. I suppose you think it's strange the old prospector went over the edge just where he did?'

'Don't you?'

'Yes. But anything can happen.'

'Too many coincidences,' Dunn said.

'Have it your way.' Roane appeared to be losing interest.

'Did you know Dan Walters had been in touch with Old Joe this spring?'

'No. I wouldn't have sent you two up there if I'd known that. I'd have taken it for granted he was all right.'

Dunn nodded. 'Unless, of course, you wanted to make sure you were on record as still worrying about Joe's health.'

Roane drummed impatiently on his desk. 'I'm giving you the time when I should be taking a shower and changing clothes. Let's put it this way. I didn't know about the plane crash. So I didn't take the money I understand from the papers is missing. And I didn't know Old Joe had gone down that slide. Does that cover things for you?'

'Not quite,' Jim said. 'Where were you between six and eight this morning?'

Roane looked at a page of notes on his desk. 'First fire reported at five-twenty-three.' He droned out the information as if it had no bearing on himself. 'I went out myself, expecting to pick up a man on the way, after notifying the phone company to take calls. The location of the fire was reported wrong, by several miles. I didn't find it until nearly eight. Nothing much. Had it out, and someone watching it by eight-thirty. I was back before nine. And then I began to be busy.' Suddenly he was more human, worried. 'If it's like this today – what will it be tomorrow, when the campers go off fishing and leave their fires burning?'

Jim pointed out, 'You don't give yourself much of an alibi.'

Roane expressed himself strongly on how little he cared whether or not he had an alibi.

'I take it you're pretty handy with a crosscut saw?'

Roane actually chuckled at that. 'Very handy,' he admitted. 'And it isn't a weapon I'd pick to kill someone.' He got up from the desk, walked over and picked up one of the red-handled tools. 'No. If I wanted to do something like that, I'd use a polaski. Now there's something practical!'

He held the tool out to Jim, who took it by the handle. A vicious implement, Dunn had to admit. About the weight and length of a heavy double-bitted axe, the polaski had opposing blades on the head that were perpendicular. One blade was a razor-sharp axe, while the other, not so sharp, could be used as a grub hoe, a pick, or – according to the enthusiastic ranger – for a thousand other purposes. At the time, however, Dunn's interest in polaskis was dim.

'You have any nicknames? You ever called the Roan Stallion?'

The ranger appeared to think Jim had lost his mind. 'Been called lots of things. Never that one, that I know of.'

'You're a good friend of Celeste Cook's?'

'Coupled with the other question, I suppose I should resent that. However, it's none of your business.'

'You're pretty well acquainted with Kermit the Hermit though?'

Roane's eyes narrowed. 'Since his cabin adjoins government land, I've looked it over. Regulations. Fire hazard, garbage disposal. There was nothing for me to complain about.'

'You know how he makes his money?'

'I know he does his act for tourists. You'll see him tomorrow probably.'

'That's all you know?'

'Why the interest in Kermit?' Roane asked. His phone rang again before Jim could answer.

'Yes. I'll accept the charges. Yes. Roane speaking.' The weariness appeared to drop away as the ranger listened to the squawking voice over the wire. He made neat notes on the paper. 'All right. Yes. Keep an eye on it and I'll get there shortly. Saw Mill gulch, three miles up? Right.' He hung up, said to Jim: 'You have time to stick around and listen for the phone awhile?'

'Guess so,' Jim said.

Roane slapped a sooty hat on his head. At the door, he waved a hand to take in the whole office with the gesture. 'All yours,' he said. He paused another moment. 'You know what this one is? Somebody started a camp-fire on an old sawdust pile. And left it burning.'

'I can see how they would,' Jim began. But Roane was gone. Dunn heard the sound of a motor starting up, saw the red Chevrolet fire truck begin to move slowly down the drive. He saw Tom Cook dart in front of the vehicle, stop it for a moment. He could hear the sound of Cook's voice raised in anger. The red fire truck drove away.

Jim Dunn walked around and sat down behind the ranger's desk.

2

Tom Cook was still white with rage, and talking to himself when he strutted into the Ranger Office. Jim had the phone propped against one ear and was making notes. He waved a pencil at Cook, finished taking down the message from Colorado Springs.

'Where have you been?' Cook demanded then. 'I've been hunting for you!'

'Not in the right places,' Jim said. 'What's on your mind?'

Cook sat down heavily. 'I've had a long talk with Sheriff Stevenson about you. He knows of some of your work. He wants me to get you to help on this Walters thing.'

'Isn't he coming down?'

'No,' Cook said. 'He's got a thousand things to do. Tomorrow's the opening of the season, you know.'

'I've heard,' Jim admitted. 'I take it the sheriff wasn't satisfied with Harlan Purdy as the killer?'

'I brought Purdy back down,' Cook said. 'Before I say any more, I want you in on this officially. How about it?'

'How official?' Jim asked.

'I'm empowered to swear you in as a deputy,' Cook said importantly. 'I have this paper from the sheriff giving me that power. You get a badge, and everything.'

Jim raised a hand and said, 'I swear.'

Cook did not seem to think that was legal enough but he handed over a tin badge eventually. 'Now then,' Cook said. 'What do you want to know?'

'You found the saw?'

'Yes. It was tossed in a gully near the cutting. Blood on it, the teeth fit the wound, but no prints, not even Sam Turner's.'

'Any special reason why the sheriff made you turn Purdy loose?'

Cook showed resentment at the way the question was phrased, but he answered it nevertheless. Apparently his superior had made it fairly strong that he was to co-operate with Jim Dunn. 'Purdy was on the phone, long distance to Denver at six-thirty. He talked to Amy, asked her – told her, would be closer – to be sure and catch the bus.'

'That wouldn't take long. To say that much on the phone, I mean.'

'No,' Tom Cook admitted.

'Purdy would still have had time to – do what was done.'

'He'd need a car,' Cook objected.

'The time limits are pretty elastic,' Jim pointed out. 'He could have done the killing first, perhaps, then got down to the phone. No, Cook. It may give Purdy an alibi of sorts, certainly it clears Amy, if she was in Denver when the call went through. I'd make a guess you didn't give the sheriff all your evidence.'

Tom Cook suddenly looked old and tired. 'What do you mean by that?'

'You know what I mean. So let's start this little talk with your actions last night.'

'My actions? What right have you to question me?'

Jim pointed at the tin badge he had pinned on his shirt well under the jacket. 'Deputy Dunn speaking,' he said. 'Don't you remember?'

'Pfaugh,' Cook said.

'Raise you a pfaugh,' Jim said. 'And that still doesn't give me the information.'

'Trouble,' Cook said wearily. 'Always trouble. And now do you know what that imbecile ranger wants to do? He wants to close this whole area! And he goes off in our fire truck. Suppose we'd have a fire while he's gone?'

Jim picked up the notes he had taken down over the phone. 'Set your mind to rest on one thing. The area won't be closed for a while, according to this from Colorado Springs.'

Cook rubbed his hands. 'That's good news. Maybe put that Roane in his place.'

'I wouldn't know about that,' Jim said, 'but we're getting away from the subject.'

'I don't have to give an explanation of my actions,' Cook said stiffly.

Jim let it go for a moment. 'Have you done any checking on the whereabouts of various people at the time limits of the killing?'

'I've checked some of the nearby ranchers. That time of day, you can check them off quickly. Their morning chores.'

Jim nodded. 'Has to be done. And you're the one to do it. I've been checking a little on the townspeople.'

'Why them?' Cook demanded. 'Why not just an outsider? A hold-up man. If Dan had all that money —? But why check the townspeople.'

'Maybe,' Jim said, 'I'm like the man who lost a ring in high grass and weeds, but looked for it on the sidewalk because it was easier.'

Cook thought about that seriously. 'That would be silly,' he decided.

Jim sighed.

'Oh,' Cook went on, 'I know their whereabouts have to be checked as routine. I meant is there any special reason?'

'If you'll remember,' Jim said, 'Turner told us that Bob Mintern was late opening his store.' Jim did not see any point in saying also that Mintern had given at least a reasonable explanation.

'I'll certainly look into that,' Cook said importantly. 'Guess I'd better get on with it right now.'

'Not yet,' Jim said. 'Tell me about last night first. Tell me about what you heard, and what you recorded.'

'How – how did you? Why do you ask that?'

'Your wife is a friend of mine,' Jim said lightly. 'I hear all sorts of things.'

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew they were wrong, that a wrong meaning might be placed on them by a suspicious husband. He knew too there was no use trying to explain them away.

'Damn you!' Tom Cook said. 'I'll see you in hell first.' He was out of the office before Jim could do more than open his mouth.

3

A rancher dropped into the Ranger Station eventually to make a report, and Jim Dunn dropped the phone-answering job in his lap. It was dark when he walked towards the neon lights of the Corral Bar and Grill.

The inside was well filled, a blur of noise and clatter of glasses.

Andrus was behind the bar, mixing drinks, and customers were lined up for self service to the booths.

'Hey, Dunn! You seen Roger? Where is he?'

'Haven't seen him,' Dunn said. 'And if you'll remember, it was your idea to have him meet Amy Purdy on the bus.'

'Look at the crowd,' Andrus said. 'And all I can serve them is drinks. Roger's the one who dishes out the food.'

'I'll give you a hand,' Dunn offered. 'What you want me to do?'

'Come on around behind. You fix drinks while I get some of these glasses washed. I won't forget this, Jim.'

'Ha,' Dunn said. 'I'm glad someone loves me. My feelings were beginning to get hurt at my lack of popularity.' He uncapped bottles of beer, poured shots of whisky for a time. Andrus even let him give change, while the glasses piled on the drain were plunged into soapy water. Red had them washed at last, started polishing them with a fresh towel.

'You seen George Walters around?' Jim asked. 'That'll be five-sixty,' he told a customer who was having fun

serving his own party in a booth. He rang up the money, handed back change before Andrus answered.

'George was in here a while ago. He had three or four. Good thing old Purdy's out of town, because I'd say George was brooding.'

Dunn dropped a bottle of beer he had just uncapped and foam spouted all over his legs, dampened Andrus' apron.

'What the hell?'

'Sorry. But Purdy's back home,' Jim said. 'Listen, what was that?'

'Can't hear a thing above this racket,' Andrus said. 'And a good sort of racket after a quiet winter.'

'Listen,' Jim said again.

This time Andrus heard a faint sound. He yelled suddenly, '*Quiet*, everyone!' and the roar brought a complete cessation of noise.

There was no doubt of the sound now. A woman was screaming. There were shouts, men's voices. The woman screamed again.

Andrus put down the glass he was preparing to dry. He put it down carefully, then started quickly around the bar. 'One of those men is Roger. Sounds like trouble.'

He had the back door open when the roar of a shotgun came through the night. There was a scramble of customers then to follow the lead of Red Andrus.

Jim Dunn paused only long enough to fold a limp paper napkin around the glass Andrus had put on the bar, tuck it away in his jacket pocket, before he too ran out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pieces of glass still fell from the shattered front window of Purdy's Parlour. Two men exchanged unscientific but damaging blows, yelled curses, while Amy Purdy crouched by a third figure stretched out on the ground.

Red Andrus reached the battlers, put a quick end to that phase of the fight with two vicious punches, then bent over the figure of Roger Estes. Amy stopped screaming. In the silence a large piece of glass detached itself, fell and shivered on the Parlour entrance.

Jim Dunn saw the main hole in the glass was high up, but he checked inside, made certain none of the stunned customers there had been hurt. He even flashed his new badge to keep them inside and out of the way, before he turned again to the scene outside.

Roger Estes sat up, half supported by the beefy arm of his partner. Amy still crouched at his side, her clenched fist pressed against her lips.

Harlan Purdy and George Walters crawled towards each other, intent and willing to renew their battle. Light glinted from the barrels of a forgotten shotgun lying on the gravel of the highway shoulder.

Jim got between the groggy but determined men. 'Gone far enough,' he said.

'I'll kill him,' Walters said. 'He killed my boy. Everyone knows it. I'll kill him for it.'

'Keep the old fool away from me,' Purdy snapped.

'He's been asking for a beating for a couple years. Keep him away or you'll have to carry him away.'

But both men had to stop to rest. Both showed bloody signs of the fierce fight, but neither presented any evidence of a shotgun blast wound.

'How's Estes?' Jim demanded.

'Coming around all right,' Red said.

Amy Purdy began crying softly, but with a sound of desolation, of complete misery.

Estes reassured her. 'I'm doing fine. Just a thump on the head from the gun barrel. Did I push it away in time?'

'Nothing damaged but some glass,' Dunn said. He decided he might as well go on with his popularity campaign, reached down, pulled both Purdy and Walters to their feet. They tried to swing punches, but Andrus' blows had robbed them of co-ordination if not of spirit. Jim shook them, none too gently. 'You're both under arrest.'

The two enemies united against the interruption. 'Says who?' They made the words a duet. George Walters wiped blood from a flattened nose. Purdy had a cut over one eye, his lips were split, and he had apparent difficulty with his breathing.

'I say so,' Jim said. 'Look at you both. Just lucky no one was killed inside the Parlour. And if you want my official standing, I'm a deputy sheriff.'

'He killed my boy,' Walters grumbled.

'Dang fool,' Purdy gasped.

Roger Estes was on his feet now, had obviously been doing some quick thinking. He asked to see Jim's authority, was impressed with the badge. 'Sorry for the disturbance, Dunn. I was bringing that shotgun over to show it to Purdy. I dropped it, tried to catch it as it hit the ground. It went off and I got this thump on the head.'

Jim whistled. 'How active can you be? And I suppose

Purdy and Walters were rolling around hunting for the Lost Chord?'

A small smile touched the corners of Estes' lips. He looked younger, stood straighter, appeared more sure of himself. 'No,' Roger said. 'They hadn't lost anything. They just stumbled and fell, trying to help me up.'

Jim felt the muscles in the arms of the two older men relax, but he kept his tight hold.

'Sure,' Purdy mumbled. 'Just tripped, I guess.' He touched his sore lips gingerly, winced.

'Sure,' Walters echoed. With him, reaction was setting in. Jim could feel the uncontrollable trembling in the father's muscles.

'How about you, Andrus? That story suit you?'

Red grinned. 'Guess they ought to know what they were doing. Me, I just came over to see why Rog was lying down when he should be working at the Bar and Grill.'

'All right,' Dunn decided. 'Let's break this up. Purdy, you and Amy better get inside and take care of your business. Estes, the same holds for you and Andrus. I'll go along and have a talk with Walters.'

The group disintegrated, started on their various paths. Jim called, 'Estes!'

Roger stopped.

'You've forgotten something,' Jim said.

'Forgotten?'

'Sure. Better take your shotgun with you. Shouldn't leave it lying around on the road.'

2

George Walters washed his face, put a cold wet towel on his nose. He found a half-filled pint bottle, had a small drink from it.

'All right. I guess I'm ready as I'll ever be. What you want to know?'

'First, how come you missed killing Purdy with that shotgun?'

Walters was indifferent enough to consequences not to make pretences. 'Young Estes. He came out of nowhere, jumped me. I guess I swung the gun automatically, cracked him on the head.'

'How you feel about it now?'

'Glad I missed. Wouldn't help Dan any.'

'You realise that now,' Jim pointed out. 'And you're lucky. A lot of people have come to that conclusion after they didn't miss.'

Walters nodded. 'You want a drink?'

'Not now,' Jim said.

Walters capped the bottle and put it away.

'What made you so sure Purdy killed your son? So sure you wanted to take the law into your own hands?'

Walters sat down at the table again, stretched his hands out in front of him. 'The law! Tom Cook was positive Purdy had done it. Talked around about how quick he'd cleared it up.'

'Who told you about that?'

Walters shrugged. 'You know how word gets around. And with Purdy up at the county seat, in jail, I thought, I couldn't do much but sit and figure things out. Dan, he was sweet on Amy, wanted to marry her. She wouldn't on

account of her Pop, she said. Well, Dan he wasn't the patient kind. He wanted her and he'd have her one way or another. Like I hinted to you that morning, I thought the two of them had gone away together. For a while, anyhow. From the way Cook talked I thought Purdy had found out about it. Maybe he did, too. Maybe he did kill Dan. He'd have sure tried if he'd found out.'

'There's too many ifs,' Jim said. 'We'd better find out for sure. Do you remember the last time your son went to see Old Joe?'

It took a moment or two for Walters' mind to switch from the subject uppermost in his consciousness. 'Don't remember the exact day. Wasn't long ago though. Dan, he came back all excited. He told me he'd found plane wreckage, that he expected to get a reward. He reported it right away and sweated blood for fear someone else would find it too.'

'Did you get the idea Old Joe knew about the wreck?'

'Dan didn't say it in so many words, but I did get that idea. Dan said something about going partners with Joe when they had cash to put in the mine.'

'And the old prospector was all right when Dan came back?'

'Far as Dan knew.' Walters hesitated a minute, then added, 'Guess it can't hurt Dan any now. He told me about one thing that bothered him. He followed you and your partner down the trail from the avalanche that day. Wanted to make sure you went right on down to your jeep, and weren't scouting around trying to horn in. He saw you go to the bottom of the slide, watched your partner after you left. He got too near the edge to have a better look and – well, the slide started.'

Jim stopped a question about whether or not Dan had bothered to make sure Buck had not been trapped. After

all, that too did not matter now. Walters' words did confirm a suspicion he had as to the origin of the slide, a belief which had begun the day in the filling station when Dan turned aside questions about anyone leaving the work at the wreck. At least that one point was cleared up.

'Did you see Dan after he disappeared yesterday?'

'Was that only yesterday? No. And I didn't see much of him that day either. He went off like I told you, and he left a paper in the till for the twenty dollars he took out. That's the way we both did, took money when we needed it and left a slip. Why not? It was ours – both of ours.' Walters clenched his hands. 'Mr. Dunn, you going to find out who did that to Dan?'

'I'm going to find out,' Jim said. 'And right now I'm going to ask you a question you won't like.'

Walters nodded. 'Questions won't hurt me. You're going to ask where I was this morning between six and eight. Maybe I ought to get sore. I don't know. Seems like I haven't got any more feelings left inside. I'm not even sore at old Purdy now. I don't know. I took another good look at Amy while I was lying there after Andrus slugged me. She's a good girl. I don't care what. She'd have been good for Dan. She would have made him happy.' The work-hardened hands clenched and unclenched, but there was no sign of emotion in Walters' voice. 'Dan, he won't have that happiness now. He never did have very much. The war, then here, hell, he never had half a life. But that won't answer your question. I was sleeping here, on that bed, between six and eight this morning. I can't prove it. I don't even care if you believe it. But I didn't kill my own boy, Mr. Dunn.'

3

Jim walked to Purdy's Parlour, saw Tom Cook inside and went on past. He did not want to see Cook right then. The man's careless talk and haphazard method of making an arrest had nearly resulted in tragedy. Or had it been mere carelessness? Harlan Purdy, dead at the hands of Dan Walters' father might well have put an end to official investigation.

Jim realised all too well he had to get more information to use as a lever to open lips. Whatever their feuds among themselves, these people would unite against outsiders and the law.

A steady stream of cars zipped along the highway. Dunn managed to get across at last, walked precariously against traffic to the Alpine Lodge grounds. He had the door of the chalet-duplex open, saw the startled glance of the small grey-haired man sitting at a table gloating over a mass of fishing equipment, before he remembered he had been moved to the Matterhorn.

'Sorry,' Jim said. 'Habit brought me. I lived here until a few hours ago.'

The man nodded. 'Think they'll be rising for flies in the morning? What you think of a Ginger-quill? Or you think a Colorado spinner might be better this early?'

'I always use worms,' Jim said and shut the door behind him on the horrified sportsman.

The main lounge of Alpine Lodge was buzzing with activity. The Tyrolean Room was filled. The corridors were overflowing with a continual toing and froing. Only in the Bucks' room, the Jungfrau, which was next to Jim's, was there peace and at least comparative quiet.

'Come in,' Sarah said. 'You can help me listen to Zebbie sleep. You don't suppose he has sleeping sickness, do you? He's been snoring away steadily the last two hours.'

'Heard everything you said,' Buck retorted. 'It's barely possible I might have dozed off a while. You ready finally to go to dinner?'

'Quite a doze,' Sarah said. 'I'm ready and wilted. It's past ten.'

Buck swung his feet on to the floor. 'I'm ready.'

'First,' Jim said, 'I want to leave this glass with you. It ought to have a pretty good set of Red Andrus' prints on it. And the friend of Amy's is Priscilla Dean who lives on the North side in Denver. Her address is in the phone book, so you may be able to find it. What time you planning on leaving?'

'When is the bus?' Zebulion demanded.

'I might weaken and let you use your own car,' Jim said. 'It needs a new tyre anyway. Or can you stay awake long enough to make the drive?'

'Sarah can drive,' Buck yawned.

'If you go back to sleep again!' Sarah began.

'I want Sarah to stay,' Jim said. 'I want her to have a talk with Amy Purdy. She'll be able to get more from the girl than I ever would.'

'All right,' Buck said agreeably. 'What else you want me to do? Should be enough to make the trip worth-while.'

Jim said, 'Find out something about the Minterns' background, about their credit, anything you can. Same for Roger Estes. Where does his money come from? Outside backing? Check up on the will Celeste Cook told you about. If there is such a will.'

Buck's eyes sharpened with interest. 'You don't think there is?'

'I don't know. But if there isn't we might be able to figure a reason for her spilling that story to you.'

'You might,' Buck corrected.

'It could mean she thinks Tom did the killing, wanted to point attention to him without actually coming out with a charge. It could mean she still knows something we don't. I'm counting on Sarah to worm it out of her.'

Sarah Buck made a face. 'I hate that expression. And judging by the past, maybe Buck should talk to her.'

Jim smiled. 'And don't forget our hermit. Check on him too. And that reminds me, I've got to call Dr. Haynes. Now I'm official, maybe he can tell me how badly the hermit was hurt – if he went up there after I phoned him.'

'Haynes was probably too busy getting ready to fish tomorrow,' Buck said. 'And so you're official now, are you? I wondered what that thing pinned to your shirt was. I thought maybe you were saving old can tops.'

'Quite official,' Jim said. 'Tom Cook deputised me – after a fashion. Sure would be funny, wouldn't it, if I had to arrest the guy who deputised me?'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZEBULON BUCK was in the office of the Pine Detective Agency when the secretary, Miss Wister, came in at ten. He had been busy on the phone hiring a score of local men, who were at work already. He wanted Miss Wister in a good humour, so he let her flutter around solicitously, call him 'Chief' without visible wincing, and assured her he felt far better than he did in actuality. In point of fact, the early morning drive, fighting fisherman traffic all the way, had tired him more than he liked or intended to admit.

When he thought Miss Wister sufficiently settled down, he brought up the subject which worried him. 'I've hired about twenty men, Miss Wister.'

Miss Wister pursed her lips severely.

'This job is rather a secret thing,' Buck went on quickly. 'The expenses will not come from the Pine Agency but from my own pocket until I am reimbursed.'

Miss Wister frowned.

'Of course, I count on you to keep track of things. Time, pay cheques, so on. I want you to take this money. Here.. Let me know if you need more.'

'Yes, Chief,' Miss Wister said. She picked up the money. 'Mr. Dunn does worry so much, doesn't he, about making the agency show a profit?' She went to her desk in the outer office, leaving Buck to wonder why men ever took the trouble to try to fool women.

Zebulion put in a long distance call to Washington.

He was positive such an obvious method of tracing a man as to post numbers of large denomination bills that man was known to carry, would have been investigated thoroughly. He was equally certain none of the bills had turned up before he started on the hunt because any search would have begun in the vicinity where bills were spent. But it was easy enough to check, and in the meantime he could rest a bit.

His doze stretched into a sound sleep. Miss Wister tiptoed in, disconnected his phone, and tiptoed out again.

It was nearly one o'clock before Buck awakened, and Miss Wister permitted his calls to come through. Zebulion was impatient with himself, with his weakness, but he had to admit he felt much better.

The Washington call referred him to a Denver bank, whose vice-president refused to answer questions until Buck called Washington again and had them call the bank. After that the local bank gave the information which Washington could have given in the first instance. Buck was hardened to such routine, content to glean the news. Harlan Purdy had deposited five of the listed bills by mail only three days ago. And the four bills found in the hermit's cache were also on the list.

Buck put in a call for Jim Dunn at Geneva.

He had another report from local workers while waiting. The marriage licence of Tom Cook and a Celeste Flanagan had been located in the records. The search now centred on the purported will of Celeste's grandfather.

Miss Wister came in and said, 'A report on your call to Geneva just came. There's some sort of emergency up there, or the line's down, or something. It may be some hours, I'm told, before your call can go through.'

'Any idea what goes on?'

'I heard the one o'clock news,' Miss Wister admitted rather sheepishly. 'There's a small brush fire burning near there.'

'Maybe I'd better get Jim off a letter, then. He ought to get it in the morning.'

'Yes, Chief,' Miss Wister said. 'He'll get it all right if I take it down to the Terminal Annex. I've found that's the way to do it. The mail truck loads there. Will you dictate the letter?'

'Yes,' Zebulon decided. 'It'll be short enough. Here it is, Jim: Harlan Purdy deposited five, three days ago. The first bills to be reported although the list of bills has been nationally circulated since the time of the crash. The hermit's four are also on the list. Can't you keep warm enough up there without starting fires? You can sign it for me, Miss Wister, and make sure it gets off. Oh, yes. One other thing. Telephone and make an appointment for me to see Robert Mintern Sr. sometime this afternoon.'

2

Sarah Buck and Jim Dunn divided forces. In the search for both information and breakfast, she went to Purdy's Parlour while Jim favoured the Corral Bar and Grill.

Amy Purdy carried a huge stack of dishes to the sinks behind the counter as Sarah came in, perched on a stool. The girl looked up, frowned at first, then smiled. 'Gee! It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Buck. I haven't seen you since the party.'

Harlan Purdy poked a battered face from the kitchen door. 'That Doc Haynes?' he wanted to know.

'Not yet,' Amy said. 'It's Mrs. Buck.'

Purdy grunted something which might have been a good morning, and might have been complete impatience.

'We've been going it since three-thirty this morning,' Amy explained. 'It's opening of fishing season you know. At four this morning! Some of the men have been coming here for breakfast first. They've been coming for years and years and Pop opened for them as always.'

Sarah looked around the empty Parlour. 'The rush seems to be over?'

Amy nodded. 'And a good thing too. Pop doesn't feel any too perky. But the rush'll start again pretty soon. The ones come here that want food and coffee.' She was unconscious of the fact she echoed, and even gave similar intonation, to that sentiment of her father's. 'What would you have?'

Sarah ordered, but before Purdy could get going on the breakfast, Dr. Haynes stomped in, smiled at Amy and Sarah and demanded, 'Where's the old fool?' He followed Amy's pointing finger, pushed through the kitchen doors. In a moment loud voices sounded, but Dr. Haynes had the advantage. The two men came out, went into the living-quarters. Harlan Purdy looked sulky.

'I'm sorry,' Amy said. 'I'm afraid Pop has a couple of broken ribs. I'll get your breakfast though.'

'Just a cup of coffee now,' Sarah said. 'Can't you sit down for a minute with me and talk?'

'Talk?' The girl was torn between an obvious desire to make the most of this chance to get better acquainted with Mrs. Buck, and some underlying fear.

Sarah was blunt. 'You're going to be asked a lot of questions about the murder of Dan Walters.'

Amy pushed back her hair. Her face was clouded, but only with doubt, not extreme grief. 'I know,' Amy said. 'Pop told me Tom Cook would probably be nosing around.'

'You probably know Jim Dunn has been made deputy.

In a way, I too, am working on the case. Jim thought you might feel better about it if I asked the questions. Now, for instance, while your father is busy.' She saw Amy recoil, withdraw into a completely inadequate shell.

'I guess I'd be glad to answer your questions, Mrs. Buck,' the girl said slowly.

'All right. You left here on the bus for Denver day before yesterday?'

Amy closed her eyes, then reopened them wider than usual. She recited. 'Yes. I went down to Denver to visit my girl friend. I often do that, and stay over-night. Priscilla is a sort of distant cousin of mine. She met me at the bus depot – the terminal – and we went to her apartment to freshen up a bit. Then we went to the Golden Lantern for dinner. After that there was a double feature movie we wanted to see. We did, and got back to the apartment quite late. Pop phoned me there about six the next morning. He wanted me to hire a waitress and bring her back up.'

'Did you hire a waitress?'

'I tried to. Not many want to come up to the mountains. And anyway Mrs. Turner had agreed to help us out. She ought to be here pretty soon.'

Sarah sipped her coffee, shook her head. 'You're not a very accomplished liar, Amy.'

'I – don't know what you mean. Mrs. Turner is coming to help!'

'Then that much might be true. I think you were very fortunate, Amy. I think you found out in time you didn't love Dan Walters, that you mainly felt sorry for him, and were lonesome yourself. You did find out in time, didn't you?'

Amy's head nodded involuntarily, but she said, 'I still don't know what you're talking about.'

'Someone made up that story for you. I'm talking about the fact you spent considerable time in one of the Cooks' chalets, were seen leaving with a man. I — ' Sarah stopped abruptly, was thankful for the fact Dr. Haynes never made an effort to lower his voice. She heard him through the opening door even before the stricken look on the girl's face warned of Purdy's re-entrance.

'All right,' Haynes said, 'so it hurts. What do you expect? Haven't you heard your bones get more brittle when you get older? And that tape won't feel good after a while either. You can work though, if you want to.'

'Thanks,' Harlan snapped.

'Yes, indeed. If it hurts enough you'll stop. And you'd try to work anyway, and the pain will tell you better than I could when you're doing something you shouldn't. I'll see you later on when I'm not so busy. Some man up Roaring Creek has a fish-hook stuck in his – anatomy.' The old doctor tipped his hat gallantly to Sarah, crashed through the front door, was away in his car with a churn of gravel from skidding wheels.

'Durn contraptions,' Purdy said. 'Autos, I mean. Just about the ruination of this country.'

'Mrs. Buck would like breakfast,' Amy said. She gave the order again and her father hurried to the kitchen.

'Well?' Sarah asked. She had to steel herself against Amy's look of anguish.

The girl came to a sudden resolution. 'Mrs. Turner'll be here pretty soon. Maybe by the time you finish breakfast. I – if it'll be all right with you, we can have our talk then.'

3

The Corral Bar and Grill was filling up with early fishermen who already had their limit of ten. Red Andrus

officiated behind the bar, Roger Estes was in the kitchen, and two girls Jim had never seen before were hopping tables. Dunn found an unoccupied stool at the bar, had breakfast at last. The place was filled with a distinct odour of fish, of wet clothes, boots and equipment and the loud talk was tinged with the same.

Andrus did not even have a pleasant look for Jim, and he regarded the deputy badge with less favour. Dunn handed over the money for breakfast. 'You and I are going to have a little talk.'

'Can't you see I'm busy?'

'You won't be too busy,' Jim said. 'Or if you are too rushed to talk here, we'll ride up to the county seat.'

'Getting tough,' Andrus said. 'Pin a badge on a guy and he gets hard-boiled in the first three minutes.'

'You can't have business as usual when there's been a murder.'

'Why not?' Red wanted to know. 'We have to make it in the season. What you want to talk to me about?'

'About where you were at certain times. And what you were doing.'

Red Andrus laughed. 'You can save yourself some trouble if you forget about little me. If it gets necessary, I'll prove where I was and who I was with. Now go away. You annoy me this morning. I have work to do.'

Jim sauntered in through the kitchen door. Roger Estes did not have to say he was busy, facts spoke for themselves. Yet he looked up from the range and smiled.

'Going to be a big day,' Estes said. 'We've been looking forward to this.'

Dunn nodded. 'And sometime, in a lull, you're going to tell me all about night before last.'

'Am I?' Estes said. 'Any particular reason you're so positive?' He slid eggs from a pan on to a plate, sided them with

strips of bacon, took hot toast from the toaster. One of the new waitresses took it away. Estes started more eggs.

'A pretty good reason,' Jim said. 'I don't want to talk too much to Harlan Purdy until I know the score. I might let something slip I don't mean to.'

'I've talked to Tom Cook,' Estes said. 'He can tell you anything you want to know.'

'Maybe he can at that,' Jim said. He waited a while, returning Estes' stare. He said finally, 'You're burning your eggs,' and went outside.

Already, before nine o'clock, the day was hot. Sun poured down from a startling blue sky, and there were only the tiniest of white fragments of clouds racing along under the pressure of a high-altitude wind.

The sidewalk before Mintern's Merc. was filled with a crowd made up largely of women and children hunting recreation while husbands and fathers fished. Shorts and halters appeared the almost universal outfit. At this early date in the season, there was a great amount of white skin exposed, skin that later in the day would assume an unattractive and painful lobster red.

Kermit the Hermit was in the centre of the crowd. He had a small sign hung around his neck which said he was Kermit the Hermit. His bushy black beard was glossy and well tended. The old cap was pulled down over his eyes. Jim had to admit the beard get-up was well done. If he had not known better, he, like the tourists would have accepted it.

Kermit was doing a jig, humming his own accompaniment. 'Fire on the mountain, run boys run.' He finished the jig while movie cameras buzzed and plain camera clicked. 'I'm a lonely man,' Kermit said. 'I have sense enough to live alone. Only in summer do I come down to look at you horrors. People – you're ghastly!' The crowd

took another look at Kermit and laughed at their own mental comparison.

Kermit whisked a cigar-box from somewhere, held it open suggestively. 'Anything you want to put in, so I can go away and not be bothered with looking at you for a while.' Dimes, quarters and half dollars rattled into the box, while Kermit rattled on with words that rose and fell like a chant. 'That'll keep me three days, without seeing horrors. My God, aren't you a freak? That'll keep me going a while. A few more, a few more coins now and I won't have to come down. That'll keep me a while —'

Kermit saw Jim Dunn at last, and extricated himself from the crowd with the ease of long practice. The people who had composed the group surged into Mintern's, laughing and discussing 'the crazy man.'

Jim and Kermit walked around the corner of the building. 'Business pretty good?' Jim asked.

'Fair, fair.'

'I don't see how you get away with it. I don't even see why you do it,' Jim said slowly.

Kermit lifted up his beard and wiped his face. He grinned at Jim.

'Or maybe I do see. You get a huge boom out of it.

Kermit nodded. 'The exhibitionist in me coming out. And it's no wonder so many writers are frustrated. Just think how little opportunity they have for insulting people personally. The writers who work at it, I mean. Writing is a lonely business. This sort of thing gives my ego a chance to expand.'

'As if it needed it,' Jim said. 'How is your head?'

'Good enough. I appreciate your sending Haynes up to see me. He thought I might have a little concussion, but told me he couldn't tell whether I was acting strangely or

crazy as usual. Personally I think my headache was mostly hangover.'

'You still haven't any idea who hit you?'

Kermit looked out across the busy highway. 'No one hit me. Why would they? The money cache was intact, nothing missing. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone I have that amount on hand.'

'Shucks,' Jim said, 'and I just wrote a piece for the paper about it. Didn't you notice your beard was tangled?'

Kermit shrugged.

'A large part of the money missing from the plane wreck was in hundred-dollar bills,' Jim said.

'That so? Well, you can take another look at mine if you want. I got them from a Denver bank last fall. They represent the amount of my – entertainment fees – for last summer. You might be able to check on that.'

Jim nodded. 'Could anyone have come to your cabin that night without your hearing them first?'

Kermit nodded. 'You should see my schedule. I had a long walk. Beautiful night. The little spruces were so sad though. They depressed me, and I realised my schedule called for a little drinking. Purely medicinal, you understand. It relaxes me for a hard summer ahead.'

'I wish you'd take that damn beard off,' Jim said. 'I can't tell whether you're laughing at me, or –'

'Or at myself? Would the two laughs be different?'

There was a sudden burst of activity at the nearby ranger station. Garage doors slammed open, a motor started, and the high wail of a siren.

Kermit said, 'A fire somewhere close. Come along, Dunn, duty calls, and we might as well go see.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE pick-up turned off the main highway on to a narrow gravel trail. Jim Dunn, Sam Turner and the Hermit sorted themselves out again after the abrupt swerve.

'Darn it, Kermit,' Turner said, 'get that beard out of my face. What sort of stuff you got on it anyway?'

'Fire-proofing,' Kermit said. 'Looks as if I were smart.'

The truck lurched across a small creek, turned again.

'Getting pretty close to your place, Kermit. Looked like the smoke was coming from that long meadow above your place.'

'Hope it's farther away than that,' Kermit said.

Jim hung on, tried to find a comfortable spot in the bundle of tool handles he had for a seat. He was glad he had worn his boots and leather jacket this morning. Certainly he would not need the jacket for warmth, but it would help as a protection from flying sparks.

The truck cut through a narrow path in heavy timber. Branches whipped back around the cab, made the passengers duck flat on the bed behind, showered them with little branches and needles.

'Some driver, that Roane,' Turner grumbled.

From far behind came the wail of the fire siren, as the other truck fought its way along, bringing the pump and long lengths of hose. Roane, who had spotted the fire, had said there was a creek nearby.

They turned from the timber into the long, narrow meadow. The fire burned in the dry grass, the brush, and in the centre of the conflagration a single patch of timber and three pitch stumps flared fiercely. The fire, which now covered several acres, had started at the bank of the small creek, where charred logs were still arranged in a camp-fire pattern. There were no campers around now, however. The fire burned slowly but steadily away from the water. Yellow-tinged grass smoke pushed straight up into the still air.

They left the truck as soon as it jarred to a stop. 'Let's get going,' Roane said. 'There's a trail to the right there. Sam, you and Dunn circle the fire. Get on the other side. You can stop it all right, won't be too hard. But be sure you do stop it before it gets into the timber. Those centre trees burning out there'll give you an idea how dry everything is.' The ranger was unpacking tools and canteens.

Turner selected a small lady's shovel as his implement.

'Put that back,' Roane snapped. 'You both take pulaskis.'

Turner winked at Jim, 'Hell, I was just trying to follow instructions from that picture you showed. I want to throw black dirt like that guy.'

Roane ignored him. Turner let the shovel slide through his fingers. The sharp blade hit the ground with a clang. The shovel bounced, and the ground was not even dented. Jim understood then why the ranchers had laughed at that point in the fire prevention picture. In this part of the Rockies, ground was so hard a shovel made no impression.

Jim took the pulaski Roane handed him, followed Turner along the trail, tried to find some way of balancing the implement for easy carrying. The smoke got thicker

as a swirl of gentle breeze came in their direction. It was acrid smoke, biting at lungs already strained in thin air.

It had been hot before, but the temperature increased with proximity to the fire. Perspiration poured out, was dried away by hot dryness immediately. They cut across the flank of the fire, which already reached the trail here.

'The path'll stop it,' Turner said. 'Stop it right here, anyhow. For a while. You know what to do?'

'Better show me,' Jim said. 'This is my first time out.'

'All right. The way this is creeping along, it won't take much to stop it. Without wind, that is. Drag the hoe blade of that pulaski along in front of the fire. It'll clear away fuel from a little path, hold up the fire for a while. If we're lucky we can come back and widen the break afterwards. Work back and forth. I'll get up to the other end and work back this way.' He dog-trotted away, was swallowed by smoke.

Jim started trenching in front of the low wall of fire. He was surprised at how easy it was – for the first few feet. The grass fire reached the miniature path, hesitated, burned more slowly and began to die down. Jim moved as fast as he could, dragging the pulaski along the hard ground, scraping away all fuel from the narrow line.

Before he had made twenty yards of path it was not so easy. More and more the fire forced him to curve inward towards the waiting stand of heavy timber. His back began to feel the unaccustomed strain first. He straightened once to remove kinks, as the breeze swirled smoke away for a few moments. The clean air was a blessing. He cleared his lungs of smoke, drew in deep breaths. At the centre of the burned area he could see the trees and pitch stumps still burning fiercely. He could see a line of poles staggering across the meadow, wondered what a telephone line was doing up here.

Suddenly his feet were hot. He looked down, jumped quickly. He had been standing in a bed of tiny flames which licked up the sides of his boots. A black place appeared as if by magic in the knee of his pants. He pounded out the fire with his fist. Flames were almost colourless in the bright sunlight.

After that he wasted no moments in looking around, or in relaxing his back. He smiled grimly, promising himself to tell Zebulion he had really found one place where 'time is of the essence.' He worked faster, moved across the face of the fire, met Sam Turner coming from the other direction, turned around and started back, widening his path.

He found five places where the fire had crossed even without the push of wind. The new spots were circled or beaten out.

The small path widened as Jim worked back and forth, worked now like an automaton. The break was eight inches wide. It was twelve. Fire only crossed it twice on the last trip. Another crossing, with the heavy blade of the pulaski clanging on rock, tearing or cutting grass, severing brush with a few hacks of the axe blade end. The fire had not crossed this time, seemed to be burning down, leaving smoking blackness.

Jim could hear distant voices now, realised how much sound had come previously from even such a little fire. Fred Roane walked across the smoking area quickly, came through the diminishing smoke.

'Pretty good work, Dunn,' he said. 'Brought you someone to take over for a while. Give Tom your pulaski, he'll watch the break. Here's some lunch for you. Don't suppose you have any water left?'

'Plenty,' Jim said shortly. He did not see any reason to say he'd forgotten the canteen on his hip completely.

He felt a strange reluctance to hand over his pulaski to Tom Cook. He had a proprietary interest in this short stretch of fire break, felt no one else could do it justice.

He grinned wrily at the thought, walked back into the heavy timber, found shade. As soon as he sat down his muscles started a jumping complaint. He was surprised to find his palms were blistered, that he had three scorch holes in his shirt front where the leather jacket had been open. The jacket itself looked and smelled like a smoked deerskin, was curled and stiff in spots.

He had a good view of the fire area from here. There was little or no flame except in the centre with the burning trees and stumps. The pump on the fire truck chugged away near the creek, a long line of red hose jumping with each spurt of water. Water that was being sprayed on to the ground in a long smoking circle around the stumps which would be left to burn themselves away.

Jim looked at his watch, was surprised to find it was after three. He rattled the lunch bag, opened it, then allowed himself a long drink from the warm water in the canteen. 'Well,' he said aloud, 'this just goes to show you never know.'

2

Robert Mintern Sr. kept Buck waiting five minutes in the outer office, before the enamelled and expressionless career-girl secretary condescended to admit him into the inner sanctum. Mintern, a heavy, florid, paunchy man with a politician's smile and false heartiness, came around the bare desk with outstretched hand. He was short, with heavy jowls, and whatever resemblance there might once have been between father and son had gone the way of all fat.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' Mintern said. 'You know how it is. Yes, sir, I'm a busy man these days.'

Buck's fingers closed around the limpness which Mintern considered a handshake, stopped himself in time from rubbing his palm on his trousers.

'How's Washington these days?' Mintern went on. 'Sit down, sit down. A drink? Certainly. Your secretary admitted you were the famous Mr. Zebulion Buck, of Washington now. Special job haven't you? Heard about your work. Great job you're doing.'

Zebulion took the silver goblet which Mintern had half filled with bourbon, took a sip and put it down on the desk. It was excellent whisky.

Mintern tossed his off, had a refill. 'Now then. I know you're a busy man too. What can I do for you?' In spite of his bluster, the man's little eyes were narrowed, as if to hide the hard shrewdness behind the puffy lids.

Buck realised Mintern was in a quandary, was wondering just which of his own activities were to come under the scrutiny of Washington. 'I want to talk about your son,' Buck said.

Mintern's first expression was that of relief, but the eyes clouded again, became more watchful. 'Nothing about the post office, is there? Bob's wife runs that, I understand.'

'Nothing about the post office. I want some information. Are you backing your son in his business in Geneva?'

Mintern relaxed, smiled a little as he shook his head. 'No. No. Not me. He's on his own. Absolutely. I gave him the best education money could buy, yes sir, gave him everything. But he's married now, time for him to stand on his own two feet. Yes sir. A man has to find out early whether or not he has guts enough to make a go on his own.'

Zebulion could not help it. His glance dropped to the father's heavy paunch.

Mintern went right on talking. 'I didn't think much of the idea of Bob's taking over that grocery. I could have found him something right here that'd paid him better for less work and worry. I told him at the time he was paying too much for the place. But you know how kids are, think they know it all, so what the hell I told him, go ahead. But I told him plain, not to come running to me for help if he got in a spot.'

'Did he?' Buck asked.

The simple question appeared to jar Mintern. 'Eh? Did he what? Oh, I get it. Well you know, that's a funny thing. I thought for a while he and Lucy were trying to edge around to the subject of a loan. But they didn't. Maybe I imagined it, because they never really said anything. You know, I suppose most fathers don't care too much for the girls their sons pick. Maybe it's a good thing, too.' He chuckled, went on, 'But I guess Lucy is a good manager. Bob, well he'd been used to the best of everything, right when he wanted it. But you'd better tell me what this is all about? Why the interest in Bob? You represent someone he owes money to?'

Buck shook his head. 'No. Not that. Don't you read the papers? Surely you've heard of the murder near Geneva?'

'Read something about it. What has that to do with Bob?'

'The killing,' Buck said, 'is believed to be connected with the disappearance of a large sum of money from a wrecked plane.'

Mintern laughed and the sound jarred with artificiality. 'You're shrewd, yes sir, you're pretty shrewd. You're trying to find out from me if my boy is in financial difficulties?'

'No,' Buck said. 'I wouldn't need to come to you for that. Bob Mintern isn't in financial difficulties.'

'Glad to hear it. Glad the boy is doing O.K. Chip off the old block I guess. You wanted to know if I'd helped him out. No sir, I wasn't asked. The boy is on his own, and he's doing fine. Guess he's got guts after all.' Mintern chuckled. 'Always said a man can't get anywhere in this world without guts.'

Buck got to his feet. 'Your own future should be most expansive. I think that's all.' He went out of the office quickly, eluding the threat of another handshake, closed the door firmly behind him. He stood for some time with his back against the panels, ignoring curious glances from the secretary. He lit a cigarette, smoked it slowly. The secretary was busy with her phone. Buck walked past, heard her reporting to Mintern. 'I'm sorry, but there appears to be some delay in getting that Geneva number.'

3

At eleven that night, the phone rang in Jim's room at Alpine Lodge. He awoke slowly, fumbled with the instrument.

'You left a call for eleven, Mr. Dunn.'

Jim said, 'Thanks,' to the professionally cheerful voice, sat down on the edge of his bed. A man, he decided, had far too many muscles in his body. Especially when they all ached. Nevertheless, by the time he had dressed warmly and slipped on the smoky leather jacket again, he felt better.

He knocked on the door of Jungfrau, and Sarah came out. 'I'm going to get some coffee,' Jim said. 'You want to come with me, tell me the news until Roane picks me up again?'

'You're going back to the fire?'

'I'm going back. I hope there isn't any fire by now. I've learned a deputy sheriff has more duties around here than arresting people. Anyway the fire area has to be watched.' Jim chuckled. 'Now there's a new excuse for you. Pardon me but I have to sit up all night with a sick fire.'

'You're still half asleep,' Sarah said. 'Zebbie called from Denver hours ago. After they got a line through again.'

'Anything to say – that I'm supposed to hear?'

'Yes. He wrote you a letter, Jim, when he first found out the line was down. A note you'll get tomorrow. But he's found out Harlan Purdy deposited five of the missing bills. And the four we found at the hermit's were on the list too.'

Jim whistled. A blonde going past them in the corridor took the whistle personally and smiled at Jim. 'Buck's sure?'

Sarah ignored the implication her husband might be uncertain of any fact he reported.

'All right,' Jim said. 'Anything else?'

'Zebbie said he was going to see Priscilla Dean tonight. I suppose he's seen her by now. I just hope he doesn't try to do too much. He's located the Cooks' marriage certificate, but so far hasn't found any will recorded. Also he's been to see Mr. Mintern, senior, and says the man is an oily crook. Zeb went into details about what Bob Mintern's boyhood must have been. Zebbie said he didn't think the father would help the son out at all, unless he came crawling back. But as soon as Zeb left, Mintern began trying to get his son on the phone.'

Jim stored the information away. 'He really has been busy! Don't see how he's done all that. Good thing Miss Wister is there to check on him. I — ' Jim stopped

suddenly, and grinned. 'I'll make a bet though,' he finished, 'that Buck has a little help by now anyway. But what about you? How did you get along?'

They found the Tyrolean Room still open and still crowded, managed to get coffee.

'I had a long talk with Amy,' Sarah said. 'You know, Jim, she's really a very sweet girl. You should see more of girls like Amy.'

'Let's leave my love life out of this for now,' Jim suggested.

'Well, Jim, Amy says she realised her mistake as soon as she and Dan got inside the chalet-duplex. She said Dan was impatient – did not understand.'

Jim looked at Sarah.

'Oh, all right. Suppose Dan did have a right to believe he knew what was going to happen? He was a heel to suggest it. And it didn't happen. Amy says she left and hitch-hiked to Denver.'

'No mention of Roger Estes?'

Sarah took her time sipping coffee. 'You know, Jim, I guess you're right not to think of Amy seriously. She's really in love with Estes. I don't think she realised that until recently.'

'I wish she'd put it off a little longer,' Jim said. 'Until we find the killer.'

'Surely you don't think Estes — '

'How did you make out with Lucy Mintern?'

Sarah could not hide her relief at the change of subject. 'I didn't get to see her. She's in bed with a sick headache.'

'Celeste?'

'Haven't you heard?' Sarah asked. 'This was opening day of fishing season. I tried to catch up with Celeste for a while. Whew! She really works hard, whatever else she does.'

'It's the whatever else I'm interested in,' Jim said.

'I'm afraid I haven't helped much.'

'Oh yes you have. At least you've convinced yourself Amy Purdy didn't have a part in the killing. And she's in love with Roger Estes, so Roger, of course, couldn't have any part in the killing. Even if Roger did take Amy to Denver and leave her there in plenty of time to get back to finish off Dan.'

Sarah said indignantly, 'How did you know that, Jim Dunn? I didn't think you knew that.'

Jim grinned widely. 'I didn't until now. Not for sure, but it was pretty obvious. Did Amy tell you how Roger found out what was going on, in time for the rescue act?'

'No,' Sarah said.

'You don't have to get sore,' Jim teased, 'just because you intended suppressing a few facts in the interest of young love. Did Amy say anything about Tom Cook breaking in?'

Sarah shook her head, started to speak on one subject, then grasped an excuse for escape. 'You'd better get under way, Jim. Here's your Roane Ranger looking for you.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was nine-fifteen when Zebulion Buck rang the bell under the card, *Priscilla Dean*, on the third floor of a north side apartment building.

The door opened a few inches, stopped when the short chain barred movement. A face appeared in the crack. 'Yes? What is it?'

Zebulion had an assortment of credentials and even a nickel-plated badge. True, the badge said 'Honorary Fire Marshal,' but it worked as well as any, during the short time he exposed it. 'I want to talk to you, Miss Dean.'

She closed the door enough to slip the chain, opened it wide and said, 'Come in. I've been expec – I mean come in.'

'You were expecting the police?'

'What do you want?' She was a tall woman, around thirty, very thin, enamelled as to face and with lack-lustre eyes.

'I believe Amy Purdy came down from Geneva to visit you some nights ago?'

'Wednesday night that would be. Amy came in on the bus. I met her at the station. We came out here to freshen up a bit and then went back down town to the Golden Lantern for dinner. Afterwards we went to a double-feature movie. I have the stubs here if you want to see them. Amy's father phoned her next morning around six, asked her to hire a waitress and bring her up to

Geneva. Amy went down with me when I went to work, and I presume she caught the bus back up.'

'That was the last you saw of her?'

'Yes.'

'The last you've heard from her?'

'Yes.'

'All right, Miss Dean. Get your hat and coat and we'll go down-town.'

Her mouth dropped open in unattractive surprise. 'I – I – what do you mean?'

'People,' Buck said carefully, 'can get themselves in trouble for obstructing justice. Miss Dean, it is not good policy to lie in a murder case.'

Her fingers twisted in a nervous interlacing. 'They didn't tell me it would be like this. They didn't tell me I'd have to go to jail.'

'What do they care? They're not the ones who'll be hurt.' Buck thought he had read the woman's character correctly, and he was positive a moment later when malice shone from her eyes.

'That's certainly right! Well, I don't see my way clear to protecting them any more. I've worked too hard to get where I am now. Children's ready-to-wear buyers in department stores have to work their way up, I can tell you. Now, just what is it you want?'

'You might start in,' Zebulon suggested, 'and tell me the whole truth.'

2

Harlan Purdy and Tom Cook were standing beside a small camp-fire, when Fred Roane and Jim came to the burned area. The clump of trees and the pitch stumps still burned brightly, shed some light on the whole area.

'Isn't Turner here?' Roane demanded.

'Gone on a circle,' Cook said.

Harlan Purdy groaned. 'Thought you were never coming. Good thing nothing happened around here, me a half cripple.'

Roane hesitated a moment. 'All right,' he decided. 'I'll drive you back. Dunn, there isn't much for you to do but keep an eye on things, make a circle every half-hour or so. Sam Turner'll know. If a wind comes up, you'll have to watch. Come on, you two, let's go.'

Jim watched until the lights of the pick-up vanished around a bend in the trail. The small camp-fire was bright. The smell of smoke was in the air, but was not unpleasant. Overhead, stars burned down through clear air. The fire truck still sat near the creek, its suction hose immersed in the swiftly running water.

Turner made quite a bit of noise as he approached. 'Hi,' he called jovially. 'Sure funny, ain't it, how we have to have a fire now to keep warm? Hot enough around here earlier today. You want a sip of coffee?'

'It'd go pretty good. Here's a bag of sandwiches Roane left with us too.'

'Had to wait until Roane got under way,' Turner said, pulling a quart bottle of whisky from a capacious back pocket. 'He's a funny duck, that Roane. Doesn't think a man should drink in the mountains. Won't go into the hills with anyone he knows been drinking. So I had to wait up the trail a bit so he wouldn't smell this coffee on my breath.'

Jim took a short swig of the 'coffee'. He said, 'A while back, Roane pretended to sprain his ankle so he wouldn't have to go up to Red Cone with my partner and me. Is that the sort of thing he'd do?'

'If he saw you drinking he would. Even drinking the

night before. And in a way you can't blame him. He's had a lot of unpleasant experiences with low altitude people who come up here and drink. Hits them hard, sometimes. You can't tell. But Roane's had to carry out a good many, and I guess it soured him.'

From what Jim knew of the ranger, this seemed a logical explanation for the fake ankle sprain. He remembered Roane's comments on root beer at the open house Celeste had given in her Tyrolean Room. It fitted the facts all right. And it could mean Fred Roane was telling the truth when he had said he knew nothing of either the wrecked plane or the fate of the old prospector.

'How come the fire truck's still up here?' Jim asked.

Turner chuckled, tilted and offered the bottle again. 'People in town squawk every time Roane does something like that. But what the hell, we might need the pump before morning. And the townies can't yell too much because Roane lets them keep the truck in the ranger station.' He pulled a large log nearer the camp-fire, sat down. 'A long night ahead. Might as well get comfortable.'

'Should we circle the fire area?'

'Long as there's no wind, there's not much use. Come a wind, and some of this dead-looking stuff'll flare right up. We'll go around once in a while.' He drank again. 'Or, far as that goes, if you're in the mood, you can run circles all night.'

Dunn sat down on the log, decided to make the most of this opportunity. If he judged Turner's mood correctly, there was not even any need for finesse. He spoke as if he was merely carrying on a conversation begun some time ago. 'Red Andrus is a pretty good friend of Celeste Cook's then?'

Turner nodded. 'So they tell me. I've never seen them doing anything they shouldn't. But things get around.

Andrus took her to a few dances at the county seat. Right in the open, and Tom joined them later. But people talked. Yes, I'd make a guess they're pretty good friends.'

'What does Cook think about that?'

'He don't like it. But what the hell? He can like it or lump it for all of her. She has some money, and she can make money. Tom can't.'

'Did you hear a grandfather of hers left her a pile?'

Turner had a short nip, and Jim an even shorter one. 'Never heard that,' Turner admitted. 'Only grandfather of hers I ever knew never had a dime all his life. But I don't know everything about her. Not like she was a local girl.'

'Roger Estes and Amy Purdy are pretty good friends too, aren't they?'

'Maybe so,' Turner said, 'but it wouldn't be the same. Amy's as nice a girl as you'll find. I don't know much about Estes. He hasn't been here a year yet. Seems a likeable enough fellow. But we hear tell he represents a syndicate owns a whole string of places like his. Maybe Estes himself is straight enough, but if he takes orders from a syndicate he can't be too choosy.'

'A syndicate? You just mean he has outside money backing him?'

'You can put it that way if you want,' Turner said agreeably. 'It wasn't what I meant though. You take Estes and his partner. There's something about them. They don't look like two guys who'd run a place like that. I mean, be satisfied with an honest take. Hard work in the summer and nothing much all winter.'

'You're thinking about gambling?'

'Slot machines and gambling. There's a difference, maybe.' Turner yawned. 'Sure didn't get my sleep out.'

'I hear old Purdy is pretty well-to-do?'

The jumping from subject to subject did not appear to bother Sam Turner in the slightest. 'Purdy's a stingy old goat. Guess at one time or another, he's owned practically everything around here. Buy cheap and sell dear, that's Purdy. He sure stuck the Minterns a fancy price. But then the Minterns got the post office away from Purdy after he'd had it thirty years, so maybe that evens things up.'

'Anyone else around here owe Purdy money?'

'Sure. I do. I still owe him a little on my place. Not much now. Kermit bought his ten acres from Purdy, but I don't know how he paid for it, or if he did. Guess that's about all around here now. There'll be others later. You can bet on that.'

'That Kermit is quite a character.'

'A smart man,' Turner said. 'Even with that phoney beard. Some sort of writer I hear. Never have much time for reading, myself. We get a lot of writers up here, but most of them don't stick around very long. Credit isn't good enough, I guess. But you take a man like Kermit. Funny in the head, maybe, but so what? He doesn't bother anybody, he pays his bills, and he has himself a hell of a good time fooling the tourists. I wish I was smart enough to have thought that up myself.'

'Everyone around here knows about him?'

'Oh sure. We go along with him, if he wants to be considered a hermit though,' Turner's speech was getting a trifle ponderous. 'What do we care about that? Kermit lends a hand when it's needed. I always say a man has himself a fundamental right — '

Jim never did find out what Turner considered a fundamental right. A cold breeze whipped down, made the grass ashes swirl and eddy. As if by magic, the black carpet of the burned area was pierced by a hundred little

tongues of flame. The flames from the tree trunks and stumps leaped higher into the night.

Turner swore softly, put the bottle away and got up. All signs of growing intoxication dropped away with the motions. 'We better get on the ball,' he said crisply. 'I'm a lazy man, and I don't want to have to chase this fire any farther up the hill.'

3

It was noon next day before Jim Dunn finally got to bed in his room at Alpine Lodge. The night wind had subsided as quickly as it had risen, and the rest of the night was uneventful, but busy. He had showered, shaved, changed from smoke-filled clothes and had gone to the main part of Geneva to put to use some of the information, the latest information, Buck had telephoned.

Information regarding the prints of Red Andrus.

Andrus had a record of several arrests and one conviction for gambling. He had served six months and paid a fine. At present, there was no wanted order out on him, but according to Sarah's relay of Buck's opinions, the authorities would be very happy to know Mr. Andrus' whereabouts.

Jim had to give up. Geneva that day was run entirely by women, with the exception of Mintern's Merc. Dunn found Bob putting out the mail, and alternating between the post office and cash register. Mrs. Mintern looked very pale when she did come in.

Amy Purdy officiated in the kitchen of the Parlour while Mrs. Turner bustled about doing her best to keep up with the rush of trade.

Neither Estes nor Red Andrus was in the Corral Bar

and Grill. Dr. Haynes was in charge of the cash register, and wanted no small talk. 'I got roped into this, Dunn,' he said. 'Roane came and shanghaied Estes and his partner. A little fire somewhere up Slaughterhouse Gulch. Nothing much. Why aren't you on it?'

'I just had one,' Jim said. He got out fast because he felt a suggestion coming on that he take over Haynes' position.

He knew Celeste Cook was controlling the fortunes of Alpine Lodge with an iron hand. She would be much in evidence, and Tom – if he were up and about and not off to some fire, wouldn't be too helpful. Not if he felt as tired as Dunn himself.

He started towards the lodge, thought of the mail, went back. Lucy Mintern tried a wan smile at him as she told him there was nothing. Bob had left.

'To hell with it,' Jim decided at last. He guessed being a fireman and a detective at the same time was too much of a good thing. He got a '*Do Not Disturb*' sign and hung it on his door, determined to have his sleep out. He did not know when he had been so bone weary, an aching weariness which interfered for a while with the achievement of sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A GUST of wind through Jim's window crashed the bedside lamp to the floor. Dunn jumped from bed before he was awake, thought at first it was morning. He was grateful at first for the strong breeze which might dissipate the day's heat. He rescued the lamp, found it broken, turned on the overhead lights to dispel the strange half gloom. It was nearly eight by his watch.

From a distance, he heard shouts, feet running up the corridors. He dressed quickly, sensing an emergency.

He pulled on his boots just as Roane pushed open his door without warning. 'Good you're dressed,' Roane said. 'I can take you with me. Come on, man. Let's go. The fire got away from the watchers. From Tom Cook and old Purdy.'

2

The pick-up truck was loaded with silent men. Jim squirmed his way to a seat on the metal floor. Bob Mintern, Sam Turner, Estes, Andrus, and a half dozen volunteer fishermen. The truck bounced and jolted through the night, thick dark, with wind touching them fiercely from time to time. A gusty wind that slowed and flared as if it were blown from some monstrous bellows.

There was smoke in the air now, and the wind was first cold, then blistering hot. They ground higher and

higher along a trail, began circling. They could see the fire now, and when the pick-up finally stopped they all got out in silence.

This was a different thing from the grass and brush fire. Jim's first feeling was one of inadequacy, and of an unfairness in pitting men against this.

Orange billows, outlined with the black of pitchy smoke. Leaping fire that raced from tree to exploding tree. The awful surge of boiling flame that came with the instantaneous igniting of each and every one of thousands of needles on pine or spruce. The surging, muttering roar, the sharp cracklings, the muffled but earth-shaking thud of falling snags.

And the smoke when it came now was a thick, tangible thing. Something which closed up passages to lungs, which swelled throats, which brought nausea to irritated stomachs.

'All right,' Roane said hoarsely. 'Looking at it won't put it out. We'll try to hold it at the road to the hermit's.'

Sam Turner said, 'We won't hold that one, Fred. Not if this wind keeps up.'

'We'll make a good try,' Roane said. He proved he was not over-confident when he added an order and a warning. 'If it breaks across, run like hell, try to skirt it. Don't let it catch you going uphill. It'll travel faster uphill than you can. There are two bulldozers on the way now to help to widen the break. I'll have more men up as I can get them, and I ought to have five hundred soldiers by midnight. But let's stop it here. There's forty miles of timber in its path. Let's stop it, and whatever you do, don't let it get around you!'

3

They did not hold it at the hermit's road.

For Jim Dunn the following hours were a nightmare of back-breaking work, of strange, fragmentary tableaux.

Kermit the Hermit, wrenching off his beard as fire broke across, shaking his futile fist as flames engulfed his cabin.

Tool carrying, gasping men filing through heavy timber, retreating. Bulldozers now, huge noisy brutes that plunged and hurtled through trees, scraping up earth and rocks, pushing aside man-chopped trunks. A wide path, and still wider, from which all fuel had been removed.

A huge mass of flame, the size of a full city block, leaving the tops of burning trees, settling down three hundred yards in advance of the main fire, exploding everything it touched.

One spot fire. Three. A dozen.

Another retreat, with Jim losing all sense of time or direction.

Fred Roane appeared through low hanging smoke, bent under a strange double pack. 'All right, Dunn. Leave that and come here.'

Jim walked over, staggered with weariness. He looked in surprise at the double-bitted axe he carried, did not remember exchanging a pulaski for it. His cough rasped at a raw throat.

Roane handed him a folded map and a flashlight which fastened to his belt. 'It'll be day before long, and I'll have seven hundred men on the lines by then. Look at this map. Here's about where we are now. I want you to take this two-way radio back a bit, to about here. You'll see a high

outcrop of rock. Get on it. I have this walkie-talkie, and I'll relay orders through you, get the picture from the radio car on the highway through you too. You ever handled a radio like this?'

Jim shook his head.

'It's about foolproof.' Roane went through simple instructions. 'When you get to this position, turn it on. Turn the squelcher up until it roars, then down just under the noise, the roar sound. That'll do it. When you talk, push this lever on the microphone. The batteries in the set will be good for eighteen hours.'

Jim hefted the set. 'Maybe the batteries will be, I don't know about myself. I was just wondering how I was going to keep walking, and now you hand me another forty pounds to carry!'

'It'll help you keep your feet on the ground,' Roane said. 'Take Kermit with you as a runner. I'll keep in touch with you with my walkie-talkie, it won't reach the radio car. We have to keep in touch with the different gangs. There are four other walkie-talkies. I'll give you orders to broadcast by numbers. We have more men coming all the time, and they'll have to be sent to the worst spots. Get it?'

'I guess so,' Jim began.

Roane walked a few paces, the antenna of his walkie-talkie bobbling above him. He turned around and called. 'And don't fall down with that radio. It's a new one and it costs about four hundred dollars.'

4

Jim and Kermit finally found the outcrop of rock Roane had indicated on the map, with Jim bent under

the weight of the radio and the hermit carrying their axes. Dunn set up the radio, hoped his labouring lungs and pounding heart would not break through his chest. Yet the air was cleaner here, and the fire was still some distance away.

From this height, they could see the fire had expanded frighteningly.

'Five – six hundred acres now,' Kermit gasped. 'Just like that. And it'll burn thousands before it's out. You know what happened, Dunn?'

'Roane told me it got away from the watchers. I suppose when the high wind came up.'

'Seems funny,' Kermit said. 'Didn't think there was that much fire left.'

Dunn turned on the radio. An impersonal voice came clearly, 'Calling Dunn, rock point. Calling Dunn, rock point. Come in Dunn. Come in Dunn. Over.'

'Hello,' Jim said, 'this is Dunn speaking.'

'Calling Dunn, rock point, calling Dunn, rock point. Come in Dunn. Come in Dunn. Over.'

Kermit said, 'You didn't put on the aerial.'

Jim slid the shining metal from its hiding-place in the set itself, extended it, screwed it in place. He tried again, 'Hello. This is Jim Dunn.'

'I read you clearly, Dunn. Do you read me? Do you read me? Over.'

'I hear you all right,' Jim said. He had to keep remembering to press the side gadget on the microphone, was glad a built-in speaker took care of the voice from the other end. 'I hear you,' Jim repeated. He thought he might as well add a professional touch and said. 'Over.'

The calm voice said, 'That is better. That is better. Announce when you turn air over to me. This is radio car

one on the highway. Radio car on the highway. What is your location now? What is your location now?'

'I heard you the first time,' Jim interrupted.

'Wait for the over. Wait for the over.'

'Listen,' Jim snapped, 'if you don't like the way I'm running this thing, come on up and we'll change places. The highway would look good to me right now.'

A subdued chuckle came through the loud speaker. 'Roger. What is your position? over.'

'How should I know?' Jim said. 'Kermit tells me we're where we were told to go.' He waited a few seconds, then grudgingly added the 'Over.'

'Contact walkie-talkie 2 in square five. Contact walkie-talkie 2 in square five. New fire jumped lines on east slope. New fire jumped lines on east slope. All available men.'

'Why don't you contact him?' Jim asked.

'Cannot receive his signal, cannot receive his signal. If you can't read him send your runner. Send your runner . . .'

'All right,' Jim said. 'Calling walkie-talkie 2. Over.'

A faint scratch of voice came then. The words were not clear.

Another minute of interchange with the highway car and Jim sent Kermit on his first mission. Jim did not envy the hermit the trip, even with the map checked off in numbered squares. In this dark – dark? Jim looked around. What he could see of the sky in the direction he now guessed to be east was beginning to grow lighter. The other direction, there was an overabundance of light.

5

The fire was getting perceptibly closer. From time to time now, Jim could see figures of men working on a new barrier, outlined against the rising glare. He did not envy them. For that matter, he did not think much of his own position. The smoke was getting thicker, and the sudden appearance of the sun added to the heat.

The wind dropped.

The radio car on the highway was full of orders to be relayed. And Jim with his powerful set, picked up the weak signals of the scattered walkie-talkies, and relayed them down. For some time he did not understand the reason for most of the orders, merely repeated them meticulously. Gradually however, he began to get the over-all picture, and for the time being it seemed good. The radio car was in a better humour, bawled him out for swearing over the air. There hadn't been time for that before.

Kermit came back from a trip, dropped down beside Jim. 'I'm beat. Finished. I have to rest a while to be able to run out of here.'

'Run?' Jim said. 'The wind's dropped. And it looks as if Roane has this checked.'

Kermit wasted little breath on his answer. 'Wait.'

Minutes dragged slowly by.

The first breath of the new wind felt cool on Jim's grimed face. It was from a slightly different quarter, a direction which soon swirled the full force of smoke towards them. The wind grew stronger quickly, and to the smoke was added a fierce heat.

The radio car on the highway broke into quick speech. It was excited now, and orders spilled out. A general

retreat again. Retreat to the next possible line of defence. A giving up of four miles of doomed timber. Jim relayed orders to the walkie-talkie men, was fortunate to get responses which showed they understood. He knew they had been listening expectantly for such orders.

He received his own commands last of all.

'Turn your volume up full, turn your volume up full. Make all the noise you can – all the noise – men have instructions to rendezvous at the radio when they hear. Men have instructions – Turn up your volume. Four men to rendezvous at your radio. Four men – beside yourself and your runner. Wait for them – wait for them. Then pull back – then pull back.'

Jim turned the volume up full, moved the squelcher until an added roar came. It made quite a noise, he had to admit. Enough sound to reach men who would be listening, expecting a retreat with the growing wind. It was not long before smoke-blackened figures hurried through the trees. Two – three –

Sam Turner came last. 'Let's get the hell out of here. This is going to be hot. How many more are to come?'

'I guess that's all.' Jim said. 'The radio car said four.' He got up, put the radio in its carrying pack, left it going full blast. He was more than willing to follow Turner's lead, and the radio signal might lead others to safety which the rancher and woodsman would find – if there was any safety. He slipped his arms in the straps, rested the noisy forty pounds on his aching back.

The men stumbled along behind Turner, still carrying their tools.

The wind increased. A hot, dry wind. And there was a new sound now. The familiar, never-to-be-forgotten roar and mutter of fire raging out of control. Engulfing trees, whirling in crimson play through the top branches and

needles. Racing on in the crowns, leaving the main trunks to burn more slowly.

Turner stopped them for a breath in a small clearing. 'We got to make better time than this. And we got to be careful here. We could —'

Jim saw the deer leap from the trees. Coat smoking, bringing the horrid smell of burning hair and scorched flesh. Running in the extremity of pain and terror straight into Sam Turner.

Jim was at Turner's side in an instant. Sam was unconscious. Jim slipped his arms under Turner's shoulders. 'Take his feet,' he called. 'We'd better get going.'

One of the figures pushed Jim away. 'You got enough load. I'll take him.'

It was Red Andrus who slung Turner over his shoulder like a sack of meal.

'Which way?' Anxious, smoke-coated faces came closer, 'Which way?'

Jim remembered Roane's orders. 'Downhill?' but he made it a question.

Heads nodded.

The small party turned to the left, crossing the face of the fire, moving downhill as they had been told. As Jim led the way, he noticed the trees were thinning out a little. The way was easier, a deer trail along a rocky ridge. Suddenly the tops of trees on either side began dropping away, were level with the trail, then well below.

Jim stopped abruptly. He had come to the end of a huge bald knob, that sheered away on both sides and precipitously in front. Far below, the fire licked savagely at the very face of the cliff, pushed flame fingers up each side.

The blasts of wind were fearfully strong now, in this exposed point. Huge masses of flame shot through the

superheated air, leaped hundreds of yards in seconds. The group of men retreated from the searing blast.

Sam Turner groaned and wriggled. Red put him down, almost fell on top of him. Turner looked around wildly, scrambled to his feet and groaned.

'How'd we get here? This is the blind alley I was afraid we'd get into.'

Jim didn't think it the time to go into explanations. Neither, apparently, did Turner, as he went on talking. 'We might have a chance to get out yet. Back track to that meadow, then go uphill a hundred yards. That'll drop us over a ridge into a valley. We better -' He stopped talking.

Fire spurted from trees far up ahead near the meadow.

Turner did not waste time. 'All right. Maybe we still got a chance. We go up this ridge, back as far as we can. Cut off all the trees, roll them over the side. Maybe we can hold the end of the knob. It's pretty bare. Maybe. It'll be hot, like a hell of a big frying pan. But if you want to get out of the frying pan, you got a chance.' He spat over the edge of the cliff. 'Because there's your fire.'

Jim Dunn turned off the radio, put it down on a rock. He took the double-bitted axe Bob Mintern handed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They had cleared the ridge of trees and brush, had even rolled rocks and boulders into a sort of pen. They had done all they could, according to Sam Turner. More than they could, according to their own exhaustion. They lay now, inside their rock nest, putting out sparks that lit on their clothing.

Jim Dunn, Sam Turner, Red Andrus, George Walters, Bob Mintern, and Kermit the Hermit. The silence was broken only by the moan of the fiercely hot wind, and the sound of flames. Hot before, the air now was almost too fiery to breath.

Jim remembered his canteen, shook it. It was still more than half full. The gurgle inside the metal container brought all eyes towards him. 'Shall we save it?' Jim asked.

'What for?' Turner expressed the consensus of opinion.

The canteen passed from hand to hand, three slow swallows for each emptied it.

'Well, boys,' Andrus said, 'never thought I'd care that much for water. Where do we go from here?'

'That depends on your past life,' Kermit suggested.

'Happy thought,' Jim said and smiled.

'Yeah,' Andrus said. 'Say, how about that radio? Turn the thing on, and maybe we can get some good dance music.'

'Where did you and George come from?' Turner asked. 'Bob Mintern was with me at the fire.'

'Roane sent us up to find you,' Red admitted. 'We got turned around a little, so it took us too long. Or – well maybe we got there just in time as the saying goes.'

Bob Mintern took his hearing-aid from his pocket, rattled the battery box, fixed the device in his ear. He smiled. 'That's better. Now I can hear what's going on.'

'You sure don't want to miss it,' Kermit said. 'Scintillating conversation was served the condemned men.'

'As bad as that?' Mintern asked.

'You know Kermit,' Andrus put in. 'Always looking at the bottom side of things. A worm's eye view. That's our Hermit boy.'

Kermit chuckled.

Jim Dunn rolled over towards the radio, hoped to find a cooler bit of rock. It was a mistake. The stone his body had sheltered was cooler than the rest. He turned the radio on again, regulated it. The radio car came in clearly.

'Calling Jim Dunn. Come in Dunn. Come in Dunn. Over.'

'I'd sure like to come in,' Jim said into the mike. 'Open your door a little wider and maybe we could make it.'

Once again the announcer showed some small sign of excitement. 'Where are you, Dunn? Where are you? Are any men with you? Any men with you? Over.'

'Look,' Jim said. 'What you say we compromise and have a little less system in this conversation?'

There was a short pause, and the loudspeaker blared the radio car man's, 'O.K.'

'That's better. Here are the men with me.' He listed them, consulted Turner and added, 'I'm told we're out near the end of Lion's Head.'

There was a buzz of voices over the speaker, as if

several people were trying to use the mike at once. Fred Roane's voice won out.

'What're you doing on Lion's Head?'

'Resting,' Jim snapped. 'What you think we're doing?'

'Do you know you're completely cut off?'

'We guessed it,' Jim admitted. His companions laughed. They could still laugh. Jim had a pleasant feeling. He was in good company, without a whimperer.

Kermit snatched the microphone from Jim. 'We're having a wonderful time up here. Wish you were here, instead of us.

Apparently Roane was pulled away, because a new voice cut in. A worried voice. Buck's voice.

'How bad is it, Jim?'

'Pretty warm.'

'Hang on, Jim. Don't try to leave the rock. That's what Roane says. I'm going to radio down and get a helicopter. We'll get you out of there, Jim.'

'I never knew what a sweet voice you have,' Jim said. Turner mumbled something. 'What was that, Sam?'

'He better make it an asbestos helicopter,' Turner said loudly.

'I heard that,' Buck went on. 'I know it'll be tough, but don't you worry. We'll get you out of there. You're the last group to be accounted for.'

'Sounds like you had a crowd down there,' Jim said idly.

'Yes,' Buck's voice was grim. 'Roane is here. And Tom Cook and Roger Estes. Jim – no, I guess you have enough trouble up there, without hearing any more.'

In spite of the fierce heat, Jim felt a chill on his spine as if clammy fingers were massaging his backbone. 'What's another trouble more or less?'

'All right. Here it is. Roane found evidence this fire

didn't get away from Cook and Purdy without help. There were two empty petrol cans nearby. A reserve supply taken from the fire truck.'

'Nearby what?' Jim demanded.

'Near where we found Harlan Purdy,' Buck's voice was sombre. 'He was badly burnt, but recognizable. The fire passed over him pretty fast.'

'Dead?'

'Dead,' Buck echoed. 'He had a pulaski blade buried in his skull. From behind.'

Jim Dunn did not quite stop a long sigh. The feeling of kinship with his companions dissipated. Even up here, even under the fierce heat of fire, murder had come to the front again.

'You have Cook, Roane and Estes down there?'

'That's right.'

'Good. Keep a watch on them. My friends up here won't run away. We'll have a little chitchat, Buck. One or two things more and I'll know which of two men is our killer. Can Fred Roane hear me?'

Roane answered for himself, 'I hear you.'

'How about it, Roane?' Jim asked. 'You said you'd do a killing with a pulaski – didn't you?'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FRED ROANE sounded impatient, nothing more. 'I won't waste too much time,' he complained. 'Sure I said that. But you have to remember this, Dunn. I wouldn't kill a man so I could set a fire.'

'You think that was the way it happened? That's the reason Purdy was killed?'

'What else? He was on watch. It was in his territory that the fire was led into heavy timber by petrol. And probably the petrol was spread around in the timber. The fire flared up in six places at once, joined and was out of control in the wind right away.'

Jim said, 'You have the cart before the horse. Hey Buck, you still there?'

'Still here,' Buck's voice came clearly.

'Were Purdy's pockets searched?' Jim asked.

'Yes. I didn't bring it up because I wasn't sure where you're going with your talk. There was a huge wad of bills in Purdy's pocket. Rolled up so some of them didn't even char, let alone burn.'

'The rest of the missing money?'

'Yes.'

There was a short silence and then Buck spoke again. 'Roane says he has to leave. Shall I let him go?'

Sam Turner spoke up. 'He wouldn't do a killing. There's probably a government regulation against it.'

'Let him go,' Jim said. 'But let him hear that Purdy was killed *first*, and the fires set to hide the crime. If the wind hadn't been so strong, much more of the body would

have been consumed. All right Buck, tell us some of the interesting things you found out in Denver.'

'Jim, you sure you want to go into this now?'

'Very sure. I'd be burned up for certain if I didn't finish this now.'

'What a choice of words,' Kermit commented.

'All right,' Buck said. 'Let's take Red Andrus. Several arrests, one conviction, served six months. At one time thought to be a minor member of a gambling syndicate.'

Andrus said calmly. 'That still doesn't make me a killer.'

Jim said, 'But you're willing to admit you have or had what are called underworld connections?'

Buck's voice came then. 'Who did you ask that question of, Jim? Am I missing something?'

After that Jim was careful to hold out the microphone on its long cord, so the answers to his questions could be heard below as well as in the rock nest on Lion's Head.

Andrus said, 'I guess you could call it that.'

'You said once you wouldn't go into the mountains in winter for anything?'

'That's what I said. Right now I'd be glad to.'

Jim held the mike close. 'You see what I'm getting at, Buck?'

'I think so. If Andrus had found a whole wad of hundred-dollar bills, and been crook enough to keep them, he could have distributed them all over the country?'

'That's about it. And, in a way, the same would hold true for Roger Estes. If he'd found and kept the bills, all he had to do to get rid of them safely would be to do so through his partner's contacts.'

Buck voiced a minor objection. 'They couldn't know the numbers of the bills would be listed.'

Red Andrus laughed. 'Who'd take the chance they wouldn't be?'

'Exactly,' Jim said. 'Considering your knowledge and connections.'

'Let me have that mike again,' Andrus said. He took it, said, 'You hear me, Rog?'

Estes' voice sounded. 'I hear you, Red.'

'Good. I'm going to have my say for once, Rog. You can't put the whammy on me over this thing. I've been a good boy too long. If I ever get out of here I'm going back to being natural.'

Estes' voice was dry. 'If you get out of there, you'll have to come down where I can get at you.'

'Now look, Rog,' Andrus wheedled. 'Up to now I've done what I promised you when we started this partnership. A fellow can only stand so much, Rog. Won't you let me go back to gambling for a little while?'

'Maybe for a while,' Estes said slowly. 'If that's what you want, Red.'

For the first time, Red Andrus looked frightened. 'Boy! I didn't know we're in that bad shape.'

'It's the wind they're afraid of,' Turner explained. 'It'll change again this afternoon, roll the fire, the main fire, right over the side of this rock.'

That made Andrus mad. 'Hey, Rog. You're taking an advantage of me. You wait though. I'll get out of here somehow and hold you to that promise.'

'I'll keep it,' Estes promised.

Down below in the radio car, Zebulon Buck took the mike again. 'For general information, Jim. Estes hasn't a shred of an alibi. He took Amy to Denver, but left her there so he'd have plenty of time to get back up.

'All right,' Jim said. 'You found out more than that about him, didn't you? About this outside backing, financial backing, of his?'

'Yes. It wasn't outside. Estes raised money on his

insurance. He borrowed some from his sister, and he had some saved from his severance pay.'

'Quite a syndicate,' Jim said drily.

Red Andrus acted as if he were sitting on a thistle. 'Hey! Is that straight stuff? He hocked everything he had and borrowed from his family to get the Corral going, to give me a chance? Why? What for? Give me that mike again.' Red took the mike, but he handed it back again. 'I guess I don't have to ask, at that. Rog was a friend of my older brother, a war buddy. My brother was killed. Well – I'll be damned. And here all the time I thought Rog was taking syndicate money and just playing holier-than-thou.'

Jim said, 'You two can have your get-together later. I hope. Right now, let's take up the matter of Kermit the Hermit.'

'Good,' Kermit said. 'I was beginning to feel slighted.'

'Don't want that,' Jim said. 'So tell us how you came into possession of four of the hundred-dollar bills missing from the plane wreck.'

'Huh? Say that again?'

'The numbers of the four bills in your cache were on the list.'

'I don't believe it,' Kermit said. 'I got those bills from my bank last fall. Had them sent up special. I like to have a little on hand. They came registered mail. Your wife would probably remember, Bob.'

'She probably would,' Minteen agreed. 'If they came.'

'You said they came by mail. Why didn't you go to Denver after them?'

'Why should I? If I wanted any part of a city, I'd live in one. I bank there, because there's no bank nearby here. But I get all my supplies, everything I need, locally. That is,' Kermit amended, 'if I can get them. If I can't, there's always the mail order houses.'

'Where you bought your warning cable?'

'Yes. Among other things.' Kermit spoke sharply, 'I see now why you wanted to make sure whether I fell, or whether someone slugged me. I guess I made a mistake. I guess someone actually was there.'

'You're pretty eager to change your opinion now,' Jim pointed out.

Buck cut in from below. 'Jim, I checked Kermit's bank account. He isn't lacking in money. And he hadn't deposited any of the missing bills because the list has been out for months.'

'No,' Jim said. 'Kermit didn't find the wrecked plane.' He spoke quickly, sharply because he noticed movement from George Walters. So far the bereaved father had not spoken a word. But he had not missed a word either. Now he relaxed again. 'And Kermit doesn't fit. Someone exchanged bills from the wreck, for the ones Kermit had. Kermit, what would you have done if you had found a wrecked plane?'

'Called the papers,' Kermit said promptly.

'Exactly. "Hermit finds wrecked plane." "Recluse retrieves bodies." That would be it. So we have to find someone whose background is such they wouldn't mind taking money from a dead man. Someone too who needed money.'

Walters was staring fixedly at Bob Mintern.

'First though,' Jim went on calmly, 'let's do a little reconstructing. The killer found the plane wreck, or at least the one body that was thrown practically clear of the wreck and avalanche. We know the man carrying the money was not buried so deeply. We know that from the state of decomposition The killer took the money. Providence had supplied him with funds. But the old prospector was snooping, probably saw him around. Later, when Dan re-found the wreck and told the pros-

pector he learned of the killer's actions. But the killer did not know his secret was shared. The prospector went over the side of the trail. In the meantime Dan had reported the wreck. When the money was reported missing, he thought of the prospector's story. He wasn't going to be the goat, and he would have been anxious for money – to get away after his fiasco with – with his girl friend. He contacted the killer and was murdered.'

Jim stopped for breath. All eyes were fixed on him, but only Sam Turner had a question.

'You keep saying *he*. You mean it was a man?'

Jim nodded. 'Say, Buck, Sarah isn't there, is she?'

'No,' Buck said. 'She's with Amy Purdy.'

'Then I'll have to give her part of it second-hand,' Jim went on. 'A woman could swing the murder weapon, the crosscut saw, hard enough to give a death blow. But Dan was killed by a single blow. A well directed blow. Buck, I think you'll remember Sarah could not guide the saw? She had the strength to swing, but not the additional strength to control the direction. So, unless you want to let chance play a big part, a strong man struck that saw blow. Another thing. A man skulking around the fire area last evening would not have been too much noticed. A woman would have. A man, and one of the members of the fire department, would know about the spare cans of petrol kept on the fire truck. A pulaski would be a much handier implement for a man.'

'All right,' Turner said. 'Let's say it was a man then. But what man?'

'Red,' Jim said suddenly, 'you don't mind telling me your alibi now, do you?'

'Why not?' Andrus asked. He bent his head towards the mike. 'I was with Celeste —' He clapped his hand over his mouth as angry sounds of scuffling came over the

speaker. He moved his head away from the mike. 'I forgot! I forgot Tom Cook was listening down there.'

'It's a base canard,' Tom Cook's yell came roughly. 'I'll kill you for this, Andrus. You hear me?'

Jim said, 'Let's not talk about any more killings. But since you want to talk, tell us where you were the night before Dan Walters' body was found.'

'It's none of your business,' Cook yelled. 'But I was playing poker. Gone all night. And I can prove it.'

'Buck,' Jim said, 'you checked on the will Mrs. Cook told you about?'

'I checked. But such a will was non-existent. What money Celeste Cook has she's made herself.'

Jim nodded. 'Thought as much. It was too phoney a yarn. Cook, can you hear me?'

'Yes. What's all this about a will? What —'

'Hold it a minute. I want a flat statement from you. Were you in the other half of the most isolated chalet-duplex the night before Walters was found? Did you overhear what went on next door?'

'How could I do either of those things? I was playing poker. That Red Andrus knows it.'

Red nodded. He waved away the mike. 'This is off the record. I introduced Cook to some boys not so far away who have a game once in a while. Never played with them myself. But they were willing to keep Tom interested in the game, even let him win a little once in a while as long as I furnished the dough and a little extra. I guess you don't have to ask why I did that?'

Jim shook his head. Sam Turner grinned.

'Maybe that clears up another part of Celeste's wild story. Wills, lurkings, recording machines.'

Tom Cook spoke again. 'What's all this? What does all this mean?'

'It means,' Jim explained, 'that your wife was convinced you had killed Dan Walters. Probably because you'd had extra money to spend.'

'I won that gambling!' Cook said.

'Let it go for now,' Jim insisted. 'Your wife is not the only woman who is convinced her husband is a killer. Buck, was that letter you sent me ever delivered?'

'Not as far as I know. And I did stop by for the mail today.'

'All right. You're sure it wasn't picked up and taken to Alpine Lodge?'

'If you didn't get it, I didn't either,' Buck insisted.

Jim tensed his muscles under the guise of relaxing still more. 'You can all begin to see what an important part the U.S. Mail plays in this. Kermit gets his bills through the mail, and his bank statements, too, I guess. He gets his supplies, his warning cables. And a letter sent to me, saying that Harlan Purdy had deposited four of the missing bills was never delivered. Purdy is killed, and other bills turn up, in his pockets. Someone got rid of them. How about it, Mintern?'

Bob Mintern sat up, looked over the side of the rock pen. There was a strange, almost dreamy look on his grimed face.

'Lucy puts out the mail you know,' he said.

'Usually,' Jim admitted. 'She didn't put it out yesterday. You did. I saw you. Lucy did not come in until later – when you had to go out again – to take care of the business you felt you had to do. She knows about you, Bob.'

Mintern said, 'I suppose you know this is all foolishness. I gave Tom Cook your mail to take out to Alpine Lodge.'

Tom Cook yelled again over the radio. 'That's a lie! You know that's a lie, Bob Mintern!'

Mintern said, 'My word against yours, Tom.'

'It isn't quite that way,' Jim said. 'I was in the store when you put out the mail. I went out, walked a way, remembered the mail and came back. Your wife was there then, said there was nothing for me. I walked, true, but the store entrance was in sight, and I was keeping an eye out for Tom Cook. He didn't go inside during that short time.'

Mintern stirred, licked his lips. 'It's still pretty silly,' he said. 'Mail is often delayed. And another thing. The rest of the bills were found on old Purdy. Why shouldn't he have deposited five of them previously?'

George Walters got the sap first. He rolled closer.

Jim said, 'A while ago I said he deposited four bills, Mintern. How would you know it was five unless you'd read the letter? And five hundred was the last payment you made Purdy on the mortgage, isn't that right, Buck?'

Zebulion Buck's voice held a tenseness and yet a strange relief. He said, 'That's right, Jim.'

Bob Mintern nodded. 'That was stupid of me. But my father always said I was stupid.'

He almost made the side in a headlong leap. George Walters' hard hands closed around his ankles, pulled him back to the pen. 'You're not going to die that quick, boy,' Walters said.

Bob Mintern had used the last of his energy in the attempt. He collapsed into a heap on the floor of the pen.

Sam Turner sighed long and loud. He had his face turned up to the sky. His face was wet.

'You crying?' Jim demanded.

'Hell no,' Turner said. 'I didn't want to interrupt anything to tell you the news. It's started raining.'

Zebulion Buck's voice came again. 'It's snowing hard down here, Jim. A heavy wet spring snow. We'll get you out of there now. Be seeing you!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE middle of June brought a heat wave to Denver. Jim Dunn sat in his shirt sleeves at his desk in the Denver office, looking at a newspaper spread out before him. The banner head across the whole page announced Mountain Montages.

The three pictures at the bottom of the page held his attention. Good pictures, clear in detail with recognisable people. The captions read, 'Festival Spirit Reigns Where Fire Threatened. Geneva Salutes the Season. Street Dance Draws Merry Crowds.'

It was Walters' filling station all right. Yes, and there was George Walters standing slouched in the doorway, avoiding the merry-makers but watching, watching. There was Celeste whirling in a dance with Red Andrus, while her husband Tom moved more sedately on the arm of an obviously wealthy guest of Alpine Lodge. There was Kermit, no longer a bearded or mock-bearded hermit watching from the edges with a sardonic smile. There were Amy Purdy and Roger Estes, well in the background, not dancing, but sharing a mutual enjoyment of the spectacle. Even the news-picture gave clear evidence of the permanence of that sharing.

Across the highway the sign Purdy's Parlour still showed. But there was a change in the small letters which now read, 'Sam Turner, Prop. U.S. Post Office.'

Boards showed at the windows of what had been Mintern's Mere.

The pictures did not show the ugly, snag-filled, blackened area where the fire had raged.

Jim turned the pages, found again the inch of space in a back page column which told of Bob Mintern's fight to get a change of venue before his murder trial opened.

The little notice brought a clear-cut but momentary image of hot rocks, fierce fire, a radio filling in little gaps and bringing hopelessness.

Jim Dunn turned again to the picture page. Good, clear pictures. He could almost hear the accordion and piano music, almost hear the scrape of dancing feet on the smooth surface of the driveway of Walters' filling station. He saw many scrubbed and smiling faces of ranchers he had met at the fire meeting. And the tourists were smiling as broadly. If Jim read different emotions in the expressions of the others concerned so deeply in past events, he still knew the summer would go on. It would be a busy time, and the changes in Geneva would be absorbed. There would be old-timers – new old-timers now – and the newcomers. There would be future feuds and heartbreaks, fires and life and death.

At the moment, none of that mattered. It was the Season.

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